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Die Hard
The white man's mythic invincibility

by Maurice Yacowar

Though the box-office success of John McTiernan's DIE HARD is primarily due to its breakneck action, it may also be striking a popular nerve in its reactionary politics. When the ruggedly individualist hero thwarts a terrorist takeover of an L.A. office tower, he lives out a macho pipedream on two political fronts, the international and the sexual.

In Los Angeles for Christmas, New York cop John McClane (Bruce Willis) meets his separated wife, Holy Gennero McClane (Bonnie Bedelia), at her office party in the Century-City and Fox Towers. The building is taken over by a highly-institutionalized terrorist group, faintly suggestive of the Baeder-Meinhof group in Germany. McClane fights a guerrilla war against the terrorists. Despite the intervention of the police force, FBI and television reporters, McClane eventually overcomes the terrorists and is reunited with his wife.

In terms of international politics, McClane exercises the mythic invincibility of the U.S. individualist. Not only is he out of his element, a N.Y. cop in L.A., but he is a reject/misfit in his separated wife's world. He wears working class among the designer silk suits. But he exploits his nature as an outsider. His separateness - for a close shave - saves him from the terrorists' initial sweep, enabling him to wage his war. From the chief terrorist's sneer at the cowboy heroic, McClain adopts the *nom de guerre* Roy (as in Rogers but also - as we shall see vis-á-vis women - as in King).

At its simplest this is a reflexive escalation of the first *Rambo* film, *First Blood*, which replayed the Viet Nam war in a small U.S. town. The L.A. battle graphically evokes Nam. There's the spectacle of swooping and suddenly rising military helicopters. The terrorists deploy such sophisticated weaponry as an anti-tank rocket. The glossy building is reduced to rubble; specifically, McClane rushes through the indoor garden that has been turned into a reeking jungle. So too his strategy has him belly-crawling and swinging through the skeleton of the building, the air vents and elevator shafts, as if he were engaged in jungle warfare. This metaphor - Coppola out of Conrad - discovers the jungle at the heart of the L.A. slick. That's also the implication of his fighting barefoot, bleeding from the deliberately shattered glass (the unsympathetic environment) and shifting from

white undershirt to combat green. At one point McClane must duck FBI bullets (the "friendly lire" of Nam). The FBI are also prepared to accept the massive loss of "civilian" hostages to effect their textbook "rescue." Indeed one attacking FBI officer (Robert Davi) even gloats "Just like fuckin' Saigon" - as indeed it will prove in his military failure. The abundance of "Johnsons" in the FBI delegation locates the assault in the context of Lyndon (as in Mel Brooks's version of the Johnson County wars in *Blazing Saddles*). Finally, as a New York City cop in Los Angeles, McClane assumes a moral authority outside his precinct (another *Beverly Hills Cop*), as if his movable authority were by necessity valid in alien terrain.

More profoundly, this plot attempts to deny the hard reality of the United States' failure in that war. The Rambo and Chuck Norris series have well established the commercial viability of such revisionism.

To conceal the film's denial of Viet Nam, the villains are drawn from broader traditions. The chief killers are two Aryan brothers, who evoke the Hollywood Nazi. Karl (Alexander Godunov) proves even more of a die-hard than the hero - or his dinosaur macho ethic. Their colleagues include an apparent Japanese, a wisecracking black (of whom more later), two Italians and more Germans. The leader is a sophisticated business-type (the post-war Nazi?) Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman). He disguises the greed of his mission (objective: $640,000,000 in bonds) in clichés of third-world radical politics. With tongue-in-cheek the villain demands the initial release of a variety of "political" prisoners, his "comrades in arms" from Ireland, Quebec and Sri Lanka (the latter cited from *Time*). Thus the film reduces the concept of freedom fighter (or even terrorist) to a greedy hypocrite, in effect denying the validity of any non-U.S. crusader.

In the hero's isolation the film by implication draws upon common rationalizations for the United States's loss in Viet Nam. The myth assumes that the indomitable, just U.S. soldier could only lose a war through sabotage. Here the local police are ensnarled in red tape (the hero is scolded for calling on an emergency channel). Deputy Police Chief Dwayne Robinson (Paul Gleason) is not just mean but always dead wrong. The FBI proves even more unwieldy and treacherous.

The second institutional scapegoat is the ever-reliable Media. An unscrupulous newsman (William Atherton) endangers the hero and his hostage wife by exposing their children on TV. In context this replays the myth that the U.S. lost in Viet Nam because of television's irresponsible exposures. There is a civilian fifth-column counterpart to the journalist: a self-serving executive, Ellis (Hart Bochner), reveals McClane's identity to the terrorist.

The film also seems studied in its xenophobia. Gruber is triply negative because he is a German thief, British-educated and cultured. The occupied office is already suspect because it now belongs to a Japanese company. The country lost its Pearl Harbor attempt so it's now coming with tape decks, the president quips. The audience is set up to relish the demolition of the posh tower because it represents foreign ownership, the clutch of transnational megacapitalism, which makes the individualist's rescue all the more satisfying. The victim company is also contaminated with high culture, what with a string quartet performing at the Christmas party and a Degas stashed in the vault.

Even more condescendingly, the film plays all its blacks for laughs. One black cop

comically pricks himself on a rosebush. The film's one super-intelligent black, gang member Theo (Clarence Gilyard Jr.), has the most technological skill and cleverness but he personifies play. He raps about basketball to set up the first murder ("Two points!"). As he makes a game of everything, he represents ability spoiled by amorality. Here we have an upscale version of the "shuck'n'jivin" black character of yore.

McClane is aided by two blacks outside the tower, but both are introduced as comic figures and allowed only dubious redemptions at the end. The young chauffeur Argyle [Devoreaux White) is Theo's opposite number, a cocky streetwise black who misses the early chances to act because he's lost in his four-wheel stretch ghetto-blaster. In his style-pretentious name and in the glories of his lavish limo, Argyle represents the young black of larger style than merit. He's the over-dressed buffoon. When he finally acts it is in a simple, brutish reflex that smashes the luxury he has been (undeservedly?) enjoying. Ironically, the untalented Argyle thwarts the technological, experienced but corrupt Theo. That is, U.S. innocence bests worldliness. That happens every time out, except perhaps in reality.

McClane's chief support is the middle-aged, portly black cop who first responds to the alarm, then by his CB conversation sustains a spiritual lifeline to McClane. Sgt. Al Powell (Reginald Veljohnson) is introduced as a comic stereotype, loading up on Twinkies for his pregnant wife. But he grows to provide a human alternative to the textbook deputy Robinson. Powell is so sensitive that he has refused to fire a gun since he accidentally killed an innocent 13-year old. But the film does not allow this sensitivity to stand. As if liberated by McClane's example, Powell overcomes his (neurotic) sensitivity to kill again. (The audience dutifully applauds.) It is also given to Powell to correct McClane's estranged wife: "You've got yourself a good man. You take good care of him." Thus Powell is allowed to transcend his initial comedic register, but only to deliver retrograde macho.

Powell's advice to McClane's wife defines the sexual politic in the *Die Hard* pipedream. The couple is separated because the woman has presumed to move West to pursue her brilliant business career, while her husband chooses to fight New York crime. Although she manages home and career superbly, the film subtlely condemns her for abandoning her husband. The implication is that she is wrong to stand by an additional man, as she serves her boss. The Christmas setting amplifies *Holly*'s violation of family sentiment, especially as it means celebrating the winter fest in balmy (both senses) L.A. (where the only snow off the soundtrack is up Ellis's nose).

Here is the pipedream: McClane's adventure provides him with the opportunity to correct his wife. He demonstrates that she cannot survive without him; she needs him to look after her. The TV exposure even proves that she cannot escape her married name. At first she used her maiden name at work out of respect for her boss's traditions; she reaffirms her married identity at the end. In her climactic rescue McClane sends Gruber to his death by undoing the expensive watch on Holly's wrist. In an early scene that Rolex was introduced as her company's reward to her for a spectacular business success. The symbolism is clear: McClane saves his wife by stripping her of the emblem of her success. In bringing her down from her tower he saves her from her vulnerability, her success, in a word, her independence. The film speaks potently to and for men who have lost their

protective power over their women. Holly's last aggression is wholly within the traditional role of woman: she slugs the newscaster who violated her family's privacy.

Consistent with the film's demeaning of woman are the passing bits of gratuitous sexism. McClane catches the stewardess's eye. He glances at overstretched tights at the airport and an undressed woman in the next tower. He ritually pats a pin-up by the power panel. This sexist is a man's man. He laughs off a man's kiss at the party.

The casting of Bruce Willis confirms the film's sexist ethos. From his first scene, anxious in an airplane, Willis draws upon his bathetic, mock-heroic persona from the airwaves, David Addison of MOONLIGHTING. He plays roughly the same character here, wise-cracking even when he's alone. In the TV series the light characterization and self-reflexivity undermine his macho pretensions and authority. But the larger-screen epic allows them unquestioned sprawl. Willis's heroic role here contrasts sharply to his ironic roles in his two Blake Edwards films, BLIND DATE and SUNSET. DIE HARD could be David Addison's pipedream, wreaking a largescreen vengeance unallowed in his small-screen reality and reaffirming a male dominance over woman that his "real" (i.e., MOONLIGHTING) persona lacks.

The open appeal of DIE HARD lies in its snappy wit and crisp action. But it has a deeper appeal in its political assumptions, which speak to the sexist who craves to have his obsolete delusions reaffirmed.

Max Headroom
CCCCatching the wave

by Erik MacDonald

ABC'S MAX HEADROOM, which premiered April, 1987, poses certain theoretical questions central to media culture. By bringing attention both to the framework and content of television, the show attempts a critique of televisual society's deadening commercialism. The show ran six episodes, was cancelled, then renewed in the fall of 1987, only to be cancelled again.

MAX HEADROOM takes place in a world "twenty minutes in the future." In that world, everyone stays tuned to their television 24 hours a day. A vast homeless segment of the population exists in a nebulous "fringe" area, and the population and the ruling class evince total disregard for "humanist values." Cynicism is so prevalent in the narrative line that it appears to be the program's dominant paradigm. The program primarily deals with the actions of Edison Carter, an investigative reporter for Network 23 (a corporate conglomerate which controls 10,000 wavelengths) and his computer-generated alterego, Max Headroom. Each week, Edison sets out on some bright new mission to right the wrongs of his media society. Helped by his faithful coworkers, the heroic Edison turns up a multiplicity of evils, all related to institutional power, which he then broadcasts to an apathetic audience.

Because the program is situated well within the bonds of commercialism and consumerism, MAX HEADROOM has a problematic relation to the forces that produce media. Simply, how can media culture generate a self-critique if the nature of the critique threatens the hegemonic forces' ability to structure a social order (or, more to the point, to make a profit), and therefore to perpetuate the existence of such programs as MAX HEADROOM?

Not content with the "box-sets" of sit-coms nor with the on-location outdoor scenes found in police shows or evening soap-operas, MAX HEADROOM constructs a physical space substantially different from the traditional mise-en-scéne of prime time television. A cursory look at one of the more technologically advanced shows before MAX HEADROOM reveals some of these differences. Touted as legitimating the concept of high fashion and design for a prime time audience, MIAMI VICE situates itself firmly within the realistic mode. Although VICE goes to great lengths to obtain the latest fashions for its characters, the entire mise-en-scéne, from Don

Johnson's white Lamborghini to the light-sculpture houses of various drug dealers, is tangibly related to its audiences' imaginative experience of the lifestyles of the rich and infamous.

MIAMI VICE also goes to great length to create movie-quality interiors, with the newest in European taste, and to replicate a particular contemporary fashion aesthetic (Janeshultz & MacGregor 1986, p. 54).

Neither the interior scenes nor the outside world in MAX HEADROOM follow any such realistic patterning. The offices in which Edison and Theora work are lit by oblique sources which alternatively cast opaque shadows and hazy washes. The office equipment, ostensibly the latest in video technology, seems a strange blend of manual typewriter keyboards, high-tech monitors, rotary phone hook-ups, ancient furniture, and futuristic office dividers and configurations. The office space and the Cathedral Board of Directors' meeting room both seem to have unlimited headroom. Unlike a "realistic" VICE office with its preponderance of drop-ceilings, these offices offer no sense of a space-enclosing barrier or ceiling - nothing to ground the viewer's awareness of interior space.

The outside world of the city offers the greatest contrast to other prime time programs. No attempt is made to replicate any experience the viewer might have on his/her way to the video store. Little exists on these streets to directly connect with any popular present day conception of the United States. At the same time however, the environment seems plausible enough to prevent the program from slipping into pure fantasy. Perhaps banking on the viewers' fears, anxieties, or hopes for the near future, any iconic identification with the non-televisual world in MAX HEADROOM occurs only with the myriad televisions scattered throughout the fringe (plugged into what?), motorized skateboards (themselves a leap in imagination), or the occasional mountain bike rider seen in a urban wasteland reminiscent of a suburban nightmare. The physical exterior is never site specific; the scene could be any major city anywhere. Yet, in terms of social reality, only a matter of degree exists between the helpless anonymity of the "fringe" and the sub or unemployed millions living in late-eighties United States.

Social order in the program lies in huge economic divisions between the workers at Network 23: the ostensible middle class, the hyper-wealthy class which controls programming, and the ubiquitous inhabitants of the fringe — that desolate wasteland of televisions, skate punks, and thugs. Rarely do we get a sense that anyone works anywhere except in television or for the relentlessly violent metro police; perhaps there are only the super rich and the "Blanks" (those erased from the computer banks). Certain parallels with the viewer's own world are apparent - power rests in the hands of an elite few without names or actual lives, who are known only through their media representations. A certain realism creeps into the picture. By proclaiming that each show occurs "twenty minutes in the future," MAX HEADROOM confronts its viewer with a world that, despite its futuristic premises, in fact, seems terribly like his/her own and differs only in degree of poverty. Certainly the despair of the people living in the show's fringe is not unlike that rampant throughout all sectors of society today and manifested in the materialism and cynicism of the young (25-40 year old) upwardly mobile, (yuppie) generation. The realism in MAX HEADROOM is not one of euphoric fantasy but of a harsh nihilism.

MAX HEADROOM presents a technocratic world, which runs without glitches as the dominant hegemonic postulate (a promise the program goes to great lengths to break), a world finally freed from the irrationality of "man." It is this society's computers, the omniscient screens, and the myriad electronic devices (while hardly yet commonplace, certainly no longer confined to the realm of science fiction) that structure "the real" as a function of technology rather than of a myopic humanist autochthonism. In the world "twenty minutes into the future," meaning is presented as directly related to the sophisticated computer systems and interactive video cameras. Signification is promised through, and as, technology. Indeed, the sole remnants of a humanist universe become subsumed to the frenetic quest for ratings. Politicians do not need to await morning to see the results of elections; in most instances they have less than thirty seconds to convince voter, and results are posted immediately.

In the humanist narrative scene, the telling and retelling of the wide world of human drama, a blip appears, an unsettling figure materializes on the screen: it's the face of a computer generated social agent. Responsible to no particular ethical code and ostensibly freed from an entire nexus of socialization rituals - sexual, racial, and political which form an individual's ability to experience society - Max Headroom's ontological status poses a threat to the hegemonic order at the same time he appears as a paradigmatic subject. In the original MAX HEADROOM episode where Edison's alterego "Max Headroom" was first created, the hacker Bryce, who developed the technology to store brainwaves in his computer, justifies stealing Edison's brain. He stole the brain not through malevolence but as the inevitable progression of history: "" see it as the future, Mr. Grossman - people translated as data."

> "We live in a universe where there is more and more information and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard 1983a, 95).

Max Headroom embodies the disintegration of meaning into information. Created by the technology of the dominant social order (the Network controls 10,000 wavelengths), Max seems the perfect subject, programmable and dependant on the good graces of the computer operator. However, because Max is not a purely imaginary creation, but an imprint of Edison's brain, Edison's personality imbues Max with a simulated autonomy. Max gets an individuality which, while dependant on the binary code of the computer, allows him to function as a social agent.

> "Leibniz...saw in the binary system that counts only the zero and the one, the very image of creation. The unity of the supreme Being, operation by binary function in nothingness, would have sufficed to bring out of it all the beings" (McLuhan 1964,45).

Herein lies Max Headroom's threat to social discourse. To whom he is responsible? On what grounds is his loyalty or subservience to Network 23 based? Often it seems more a matter of his own convenience than ethical motivation. The worst reprisal Max could suffer would be if someone unplugged his computer. While kept under an apparently tight rein at Network 23, Max can appear at any time on the screens of the silent masses living anonymously on the fringe or in box-like apartments. Since in the world of MAX HEADROOM the plenteous images on the screen seem the only context for social interactions, Max's auto-deterministic presence (he seems to go wherever he pleases, he can access any screen) could

easily undermine the usual control of the televisual as he appears and disappears on any screen without regard for the network's or advertisers' concerns or prerogatives. He need make no effort to respect anyone's proprieties or interests and can wander freely, commenting on and undermining the network's authoritarian position.

Max's lack of an identifiable social position, his freedom from the mortal coil of humanity, potentially disrupts any possibility of the audience's "common pre-understanding" necessary to the narrative event. Without the assumption of certain stable reference points in the narrative discourse, there is no compulsory categorical imperative to structure that narrative. Quite simply, it is unclear how Max will fit into social discourse, for he is not bound to any ethical sensibility.

In "The Orders of Simulacra" Jean Baudrillard traces the progression of the image since the Renaissance. From the age of the "Counterfeit," the pre-industrial revolution phase, through the "Production Scheme" of the industrial era, we have now arrived in a universe of "Simulation," which is "the reigning scheme of the current phase that is controlled by the code" (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 83). The code, the god of the computer generation, replaces illusion. Potentially parallel meanings disappear into the emission of signals which can be tested by an "on/off" binary scansion for their applicability. The production of meaning has progressed from the counterfeit phase, when individual interpretation was possible through the flexibility of the sign, and one could test the sign's plurality by comparing it to a paradigmatic original. Now we experience the simulation of meaning, producible from a model. The originary referent disappears, and referentiality is then reconstructed by affiliation to the model.

> "Here are the models from which proceed all forms according to the modulation of their differences" (101).

An analogy for the precession of simulacra can be seen in the paper crowns that the fast food chain Burger King hands out to children. Originally the crown represented the King's divine authority. With the rise of the middle class, crowns became, by association with the king, representative of wealth, and (because of their reproducibility) available for trading on the market, something implausible in the days of the real. With the referent thus opaqued by its marketability, the "death of the king," we now have "Burger King" - objects with no tangible relationship to any authority.

At stake in simulation then is the erasure of Origin and End. No longer can a "real" be found behind the image, whether the real sought be a king or a hamburger. In simulation no referent is necessary for the image to circulate. The model puts an end to the myth of origins, for nothing issues except from an inevitable code whose end has nothing to do with conclusions.

Opinions or differences, disappear in simulation: "for opinions as for material goods: production is dead, long live reproduction." (10) Opinions are replaced by polls. In the networks the merit of a television program no longer rests on universalized aesthetics, but on Public Opinion. In the weekly Nielsen Ratings a random sampling of televisions are polled for viewing habits, and these ratings function as the be all and end all, the bottom line for the mighty advertising dollar. In the statistical contemplation of opinion, questions follow the binary code:

quivocation is dead. Polls are constructed as question/response mechanisms that effectively erase differences or shades of opinion. The great hope of humanity, its ability to equivocate or pluralize meaning, becomes negated in the ages of simulation: we watch MAX HEADROOM, or we watch something else and MAX HEADROOM goes off the air.

MAX HEADROOM attempts to embody Baudrillard's gleeful prediction of a world beyond human agency. Despite the show's centering of the narrative on Edison's antics, the viewer always has the sense that Edison's reportage depends on his interactive video camera and on the heroine Theora's computer tracking which guides him on his missions. His newsbreaks are procured by the omnipotent computer. Any success apparently happens because Theora and Edison can access and utilize divergent computer technologies, not because of any personal attribute. Similarly, it is not the human interest or moral imperative of Edison's stories which command the attention of the producers and sponsors of Network 23 but the stories' performance on the ad market - the neologic version of a futures market. A conversation in the episode on selling terrorism contained the following lines:

> 1st exec.: "It's our moral and ethical duty to carry this."
>
> 2nd exec.: 'Not only that, but it will sell advertising."
>
> Chairman: "Okay, we'll run it!'

The only measurable success is a program's commercial viability. Since in the world "twenty minutes into the future," the only growth industry is television, the only expanding market is the amount of advertising space available, a commodity determined by convincing the audience to spend time in front of the television. Advertising profits become the critical measure of value in this society. Only those programs which successfully address a majority audience, regardless of "aesthetic" value, are promoted. Variations are subsumed by the binary code - either the program sells or it disappears. The humanist values explicated through character interaction are subordinated to a fascination with a seamless technocratic society where news functions only as a control on errant technology.

The utterly nihilistic world view of both the people in power and the "man-in-the-street" in the U.S. post-capitalist society — a society of rampant Reaganites, supply-side economics, and wheezing rapist-ministers from the PTL Club — has produced one of the most cynical national moods of the past hundred years. And this society finds its reflection in MAX HEADROOM.

The only humanist "hope" is Edison's clichéd naïve-reporter attitude, one reminiscent of the innocent Jimmy Olson from the old SUPERMAN series. However, this posturing looks ridiculous in MAX HEADROOM. For example, while pondering a series of televised terrorist attacks, Edison comments to his boss Murray, "Since when has news been entertainment?" Murray bewilderedly replies; "I don't know. Hasn't it always been?" Likewise, when terrorists bomb the ad-market building, the newscasters' focus is still on how the event is affecting the market, not on the wounded or dead. In light of the humanist mission to promote the interests of a universal "man," MAX HEADROOM exemplifies Baudrillard's pessimistic dismissal of traditional notions of value and man. The show apparently completes the logic of hyperrealism, subsuming the technocratic world into an

undifferentiated morass where resistance is indeed impossible.

The power brokers are not the only ones who are cynical about what generates "value" in society. The lowly inhabitants of the fringe, that nebulous area of "the city" not unlike America's slums where life seems meaningless, see no ulterior categorical imperative for operating according to an ethical model. The skateboard punks, the likes of whom any frequenter of Los Angeles or San Francisco can find scrounging for subsistence, enter into the brutal and deadly game of "Raking" not to further any egocentricism, machismo, or heroism, but merely to exist:

> Edison: "Why do you do it? To win?"
>
> Punk: "Win? No way, it's about survival. You don't win out here, only survive."

Stretching their miserable existence from meal to meal, day to day, the skate punks enter a horridly brutal game for the enjoyment and benefit of corporate betters who cash in huge wagers, while the drugged-out skaters desperately struggle to stay alive long enough to shutter out with their earnings, through drugs or other small comfort, the totalitarian gloom of a desolate world. Theirs is not the studied cynicism of a "gimme" generation too smart and educated to believe in anything except capital gain and one-upmanship, but the mood from a step beyond where economy means survival and cynicism masks desperation.

Similarly the middle class in MAX HEADROOM is shuttled into crate-like apartments and tuned into their sole respite, the televisual world. In MAX HEADROOM the faceless social mass, Baudrillard's fear of a uniform nothingness, has apparently become realized. Whereas in MIAMI VICE (or similar shows) Crockett or Tubbs can be affected by the pleas, however pathetic, of an "average citizen" and in fact often become romantically involved with an innocent victim, MAX HEADROOM denies the possibility of this humanism. In that show, the silent majorities stumble around innocuous and unbeknownst to their television world.

The social model presented in MAX HEADROOM allows the characters no personal relief. Edison and Theora either "interface" through the impersonal guise of the computer, or they assume conventional social roles through their objectifying comments about each other. Their sexuality is subsumed to the binary code and sublimated into computer jargon. Yet the consequences of the logic of simulation for such sexuality are left unexplored. Instead, a melodramatic reverence for Edison's efforts appears, one which subverts the hopeless nihilism of the show by re-establishing the promise of agency through individual effort. Rather than following through on the postmodernist problematization of individual heroics, which the show posits in the form of the character Max Headroom, the show allows Edison to dominate and focus the narrative. Finally, it is his story the his/tory of "man" - which the audience watches. Even the minor characters revert to a humanist scheme. Big Reg, the aging punk who runs "Big-Time T.V.," initially revels in a "no future" cynicism. Finally the audience discovers that he is in fact involved in a very conventional relation with his secretary, and by the last few shows his gleeful anarchy has turned into a servile apprenticeship to Edison.

Indeed, the social scene in MAX HEADROOM reminds one all too much of a traditional family unit with the father, Edison, safely and paternally running the

show. Despite the occasional disruptions, this structure dominates the narrative. While the participants ostensibly act autonomously, they all eventually end up serving Edison or Network 23. In effect, what happens is that instead of the presumed implosion of any categorical moral imperative, a contingent morality has become established. The show's morality reinserts the legitimacy of a white male epistemology, and that morality not surprisingly serves the interests of Network 23. In any crisis scene, Edison manages to maintain control or establish his will as the predominant one. What makes this particular familial scene at all different from any of the "family" programs on primetime television is that the characters do not have to pretend any bond exists between them other than the economic advantages Network 23 offers.

The dystopic anarchy which MAX HEADROOM and Baudrillard promise begins to undermine itself at the point where the actual structures of MAX HEADROOM's world become apparent. In this world the gleeful invalidation of the social contract has been valorized as the norm and information has replaced meaning as the dominant scheme. Here, the ensuing rise of the simulacrum and attendant anarchy would appear to open up the possibility of a liberation from the very cultural norms which originally designated "the hot scene of reproduction."

In Baudrillard's seductive scene, such a liberation from norms implodes in the nothingness of "the masses." Ideally, in the resulting vacuum, new, nonsexist, nonracist ways of thinking sexuality and social relations could be facilitated. As Baudrillard promised, the disintegration of a hierarchical scheme that had been predicated on the dissemination of images of the real should leave a world where no one scheme accrues precedence over another. Then traditional hierarchies of race, class and sex would no longer need to encode the rapidly disappearing social scene. However, Baudrillard's critique is disturbingly ambiguous at this point. While the desolate universe he predicts for the developed world (U.S., Europe) certainly is hard to ignore, especially in the face of ecological disaster, corporate power and the dramatic increase in homeless and disenfranchised people (all well represented in MAX HEADROOM), Baudrillard's refusal to posit a radical revolutionary agency makes his work problematic for many people.

Baudrillard is seductive because his critique consoles itself with absolutely no possibility for agency of any kind. In his scheme, agency would also imply the validation of an ulterior epistemology, and he has relentlessly annihilated as "false consciousness" humanism's various utopias. Such bleakness can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It can be used to insist on the futility of traditional notions of agency, including the current revolutionary social agent of the left, with the result that such a pessimism may sometime in the future (maybe twenty minutes from now) potentiate a radically new way of thinking subjectivity. Or the pessimism can be seen as a nostalgic rear-guard conservatism disguising the reestablishment of an operative moral contingency. Both ABC and MAX HEADROOM fail to follow through on the potentially radical consequences of their original premises, thus undercutting the very critique of media culture which the show presents.

The show's promise of a world beyond agency, of "blanks," computer screens, and the digital humming of the silicon chip becomes forestalled by the show's inability to face the consequences of its own media critique. The show depicts its technological world not as a cure-all, but rather as continually at the mercy of

malevolent individuals who manipulate it for their own ends. This world is perpetually on the verge of malfunctioning, leaving its inhabitants to fend for themselves, or again be at the mercy of "good" guys (Edison, Theora) or "bad guys" (politicians, executives). Indeed, in MAX HEADROOM each episode focuses on a wistful reliance on the abilities of the individual (male). While MAX HEADROOM revels in the domination of the human by the technological, it is still thoroughly imbued with either a belief in or nostalgia for the concrete universal subject: Man, a presence who for lack of traditional moral categories, must needs create his own.

MAX HEADROOM promises to deliver an apolitical nihilism in the form of a vicious critique of network television, contemporary society, and consumer cynicism. The show lures its audience into Edison's narrative - impeccably hip, he seems the essence of late-eighties manhood. But the show also consciously frames the boundaries of its narrative and emphasizes the structural make-up of the program, opening the logic of the televisual world to the audience. The technological apparatus depicted in the show - televisions without on/off switches, videophones, and the 10,000 wavelengths that Network 23 controls - draw attention to the fact that MAX HEADROOM is a totally televisual world, where nothing else could possibly exist. The leader scenes which precede each show are separated by white static. Each jump cut announces a narrative shift, which in other shows would be glossed by a smooth edit.

Inducing the viewer to recognize the show's constructed nature as well as that of the narrative, MAX HEADROOM draws a parallel with its viewers' own participation in social discourse. The extreme nihilism and passivity of the story's "citizens" and viewers, so seductively attractive in MAX HEADROOM, reflects ABC's audience. The narrative line about passivity and nihilism calls attention to the viewing habits of a country where "the average" person watches television seven hours a day. It also points to a passivity which accepts network news, rightly or wrongly, as the central source of information and commentary (and network news imagines itself as such — Miller, 1986, 220). In the U.S. where a technological fetishism attempts to protect the country from invasion (both in its complexity and its absurdity, SDI makes the computer security systems in MAX HEADROOM seem reasonable), our viewing habits, if taken to the next logical step "twenty minutes into the future," seem inane. Drawing attention to these habits may point to the hysteria of such complete acquiescence, but we still willingly submit.

MAX HEADROOM revels in its pessimism. But it also refuses to conceal the mechanisms of its society. Relentlessly exposing the greed of Network 23, the show also exposed the greed of prime time television. As Network 23 sacrificed individuals and careers to maintain its high ratings, ABC programs selectively do the same so as to offend none of its sponsors. The show, which was one of the most expensive ever made, was considered too risky by ABC, and it was cancelled after only six of the eight original episodes were aired. It was renewed for the fall of 1987, partially on the basis of a large viewer response campaign to have it restored and partially because ABC recognized the demographic market it attracted.

The "critique" MAX HEADROOM makes of television falls victim to its own double-edged sword. If MAX HEADROOM posits a world of crass commercialism where the advertising buck is the bottom line, the program itself falls into that same category. It was renewed only on the promise of attracting a lucrative

advertising audience. The audience most likely to catch on to and thus watch MAX HEADROOM also happens to be the most attractive to advertisers. It's the viewership of 25-40 year olds, college educated, with or without children, and making over $25,000 a year. If MAX HEADROOM exposes the nihilism of the people who make the news, then its producers also display that same sensibility. For the show makes explicit use of such late eighties icons as computer whizzes, faceless, lost masses stuck to their television screens, and the cool "surface" of Theora and Edison's relation - which are all icons dear to a group of affluent youngsters endowed with the critical, intellectual tools gained through the benefit of their upper middle class educations. This audience possesses the sensibility of "fashionable nihilism" necessary to appreciate MAX HEADROOM.

Perhaps a program that wished to make a more radical critique would take the point of view of the Blanks or skate punks. However, the dominant narrative position is occupied by Edison Carter, who acts and dresses like any of the affluent (male) audience members that advertisers are after. This image of the hero indicates that this is a program for and about the newly disaffected upper middle class. It's a class that dreads and scorns the alienation of their parents generation but also rejects the wide-eyed naiveté of the "hippie" generation's hopes for community. This class has the material resources to avoid the "fringe's" desolation. And this audience is too cynical and too attached to its material life styles to attempt "living beyond the pale" in the world of the Blanks.

While none of this social collusion necessarily negates MAX HEADROOM's "message," it exemplifies a crisis in televisual entertainment. With so much invested in MAX HEADROOM, the producers must see an economic return. This is what determines a program's future, a reality which means meeting the wishes of ABC and its advertisers, regardless of the program's artistic merits. Had MAX HEADROOM been able to sustain the absolute nihilism of its initial impulse without finding recourse to melodramatic humanism - the heroic Edison, the lovable big Reg perhaps it could have delivered a truly radical critique of televisual society. However, it was unable to maintain such a stance - especially because of television's insistence on a happy ending. Consequently, MAX HEADROOM satisfies Baudrillard's critics, who see in his work a return to a conservative moral imperative, a nostalgia for social hierarchies and a rightwing anarchy, and who also overlook the alternative reading of Baudrillard which develops a relentless and vicious critique of both liberal and conservative humanism. MAX HEADROOM remains victimized by its own - and ABC's - unwillingness to imagine a despair beyond human agency.

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Robocop
Murphy's law, Robocop's body, and capitalism's work

by Julie F. Codell

"They'll fix you, they fix everything." — Murphy/Robocop

Considered one of the most violent films of the year, Paul Verhoeven's ROBOCOP is also unexpectedly a satire on the incongruities of consumer capitalism. The films police drama reiterates the most popular and most violent film and TV subject; yet the rich texture, created by interspersed newscasts, hi-tech sets and simulated advertising, exposes a faltering U.S. technology and infrastructure in a world on the brink of self-annihilation. In the film's combination of populist cultural values with a witty critique of those values, ROBOCOP satirizes the tensions among the seduction by consumer goods, the new service-oriented economy, progressive ideals and the actual practices of our economic and political institutions.

In the film Murphy, a cop from a quiet district, is transferred to what his fellow officers call "hell," duty in the most dangerous section of Detroit. In the process of tracking down members of the drug underworld, including its leader, a thoroughly evil figure named Boddicker, Murphy and his female partner Lewis are caught in an abandoned factory, now used by Boddicker and his gang for manufacturing cocaine. Murphy is attacked and tortured by the gang and left for dead.

Cut into this series of events and parallel to it is another series in the corporate meeting room of Omni Consumer Products (OCP), a corporation moving into social and governmental services (privatization) such as the military, hospitals, fire and police departments. The meeting introduces the police robot, ED-209, created by company Vice-President Jones; during the demonstration of Jones's product, however, the robot malfunctions and kills one of the corporate team, whose body falls on the architectural model of "Delta City," the new Detroit. This model represents the dream of OCP's president, who sees the robot's murderous malfunctioning as an annoying interruption in his creation of that new city. Taking this opportunity to rise in the corporate structure by ingratiating himself with the president, Bob Morton (Jones's rival) offers the President his team's version of a robot cop to replace ED209.

At this point the two series of events coincide. Murphy, barely alive, is revived by a medical team, so his body can be used by Morton to create Robocop, a knight in shining head-to-toe indestructible steel, who moves in masterfully lumbering, yet computerized gestures and body language. Thwarting criminals and saving the innocent, Robocop is programmed to serve and protect, to arrest rather than kill, and never to attack an OCP employee. His recycling as Robocop destroys the entity of Murphy, initiating the subplot of Murphy's recapture of his former identity through his memory, his one remaining human attribute. His programming is further interrupted when he discovers that Jones and Boddicker work together, scheming to provide drugs and illicit services to workers employed in building the model city. Eventually, Murphy kills Boddicker in an extremely violent shoot-out in the drug factory and then dispatches Jones in the corporate meeting room in the final scene of the movie, thus saving and serving the corporation.

Montaged among the plot incidents are a number of fascinating recreations of ads for futuristic products and newscast reports of daily malfunctions of machines and services. The film's sets are filled with hi-tech, beautifully designed consumer products, as attractive and erotic as they are poorly made. These interruptions in the plot create dissonance between the film's facsimile of cop thrillers or westerns undercut by these reminders of the violence, greed and entropy that lie at the heart of our abundance. In both news and advertising everything is commodicized ("You give us three minutes, we'll give you the world").

Robocop's body is the nexus of hi-tech production and of consumerism as an end-in-itself. His body focuses a wide range of literal and metaphoric body imagery, expanding into the total corpus: the human body, the corporate body, the body politic, the social body. Throughout the film characters act out fantasies of invulnerability with extensions of the body, such as weapons, drugs and luxuries. According to the president of OCP, the city of Detroit is a body, suffering from a "cancer of crime." By eradicating this cancer, he hopes to "breathe life" into Detroit by creating a million new jobs in the construction of "Delta City," whose motto is "the future has a silver lining."

The body's significance in the film is conveyed through agonizing scenes of Murphy's pain and suffering that communicate the very nature of pain: physical pain defies language. Elaine Scarry in her brilliant book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* describes the nature of pain and the political ramifications of its inexpressibility in war and torture.[1][open notes in new window] ROBOCOP is about the physical pain inflicted on bodies (physical, corporate, social, political) and the ways in which we ideologize (because we cannot verbalize) the experience of pain. The inexpressibility of pain makes it impossible to feel another's pain reflected in the paucity of pain language.[2] Historically, according to Scarry, pain is usually described by allusions to agents inflicting pain, such as weapons or torture instruments, and to the bodily damage done:

> "Physical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage, but these things are referential; consequently we often call on them to convey the experience of the pain itself" (p. 15).

In ROBOCOP, Verhoeven presents a long torture scene focusing on Murphy's suffering, screams and staggering physical disability. Murphy is shot at part-by-part, so that his pain, not his death, is the focus. His pain, however, does not end

with Boddicker's *coup de grace*, but is prolonged by the medical team trying to save him and by the corporation that recycles him for its own use. In the film the hospital's life-preserving treatment and practices are as violent as the life-destroying acts of the Boddicker gang. Their devices — electrical shocks, tubes, injections — fail to revive Murphy, but only recycle him for corporate manipulation. The corporate team's decisions to cut off the one arm the doctors saved and to try and destroy his memory completes his physical destruction. His body endures violence from all quarters, even unwittingly from himself, since Murphy signed a release form when he became a cop. Murphy, reified, signed himself away body and soul to the company.

The corporation inflicts pain on its own agents; police complain about OCP's incompetence and inability to provide back-up help or protect them against the worst cop killer in Detroit's history, Boddicker. But it is OCP's VP Jones who has hired Boddicker to build up an illegal underworld which will provide drugs, gambling and prostitution to the expected two million workers (whom Jones calls "new markets"). More telling is the failure of characters to respond adequately to death and pain: Jones calls his robot ED-209's fatal malfunction a mere "glitch," while the president's only response to the employee's violent death is that he is "disappointed." In the opening montage newscasts run graphically violent footage, but each time the camera returns to the newscasters they smile cheerfully, acting as if they had not seen the violence they are, in fact, reporting. The film engages in its own gratuitous violence, especially in the now-standard final shoot-out with its piled up bodies, each one dispatched by a different, ingeniously horrible death.

Violence appears in all activities, whether police work, medicine, corporate rivalries, organized or random crime. The superficial contradictions between scientific ideals and corporate motives quickly dissolve in the ready collaboration between torturers, medical profession and government described by Scarry in fascist regimes in Greece, Nazi Germany, Latin America, the Philippines and the Soviet Union. Medical personnel are required by such regimes to assist torturers, to add pain to pain as collaborating doctors employ advanced technology to increase the torturer's effects. In the case of the concentration camps, industrial companies also participated in the "final solution" by providing technologies of destruction.

Despite its ubiquity, however, pain has no language and its inexpressibility has serious consequences for our value system:

> "If property (as well as the ways in which property can be jeopardized) were easier to describe than bodily disability (as well as the ways in which a disabled person can be jeopardized), then one could not be astonished to discover that a society had developed sophisticated procedures for protecting 'property rights' long before it had succeeded in formulating the concept of 'the rights of the handicapped" (Scarry, p. 12).

As Robocop enters the corporate building for the final time, his nemesis, ED-209, threatens to kill him because he is "illegally parked on private property." As Scarry points out our callous loss of affect is not simply the result of seeing so much media violence. It is primarily the result of accommodating our awareness to language which articulates violence and death in terms of ideologies of power and purpose

(i.e., justifying it and rationalizing its perpetuation).

Police work is a locus of suffering, pain and death, what Jones callously calls the "inherent risks" of police work. The police officers complain about OCP's incompetence, calling the company "a bunch of morons" who will "manage the department into the ground," and throughout the film police threaten and finally vote to strike. Their problems are typified by the failure of Murphy and Lewis to get a back-up despite their desperate calls. Disagreements among officers over whether to strike result from sharply contrasting philosophies of the role of police as public servants. While officers demand safety, their sergeant argues that police exist to serve the city at all costs; after all, he says, they are "not plumbers, but are police *officers*." While he believes police are professional or semi-professional, OCP treats them as easily replaceable. The potential for such unbearable working conditions in actual urban police forces is real: Congress refused to outlaw bullets capable of piercing bullet-proof vests despite lobbying by police on behalf of their own safety. The NRA won the debate. Police are the property of the city and subject to the political, as well as the legal and protective, needs of its citizens and government superiors.

Suffering and deprivation were identified with work in its 19th-century historical reality for Marx and Engels. While undergoing excessive, physically demanding labor, workers were denied the fruits of their labor, whether ownership, self-determination over working conditions, or enjoyment of the products they created. In the film, work becomes the central human field for action and emotion. The work of the film, furthermore, is service-oriented (police work and the public services taken over by OCP) and bears its own conflicts of economic needs and emotional authenticity.

Work replaces family as the center of human and social life. The traditional role of the family as an extension of the body and a comfort to it are replaced by the workplace where most of us spend the majority of our time anyway. The workplace is now home — in the precinct station locker room in the film policemen and women dress and undress together without sexual interest, as if siblings. The workplace offers an opportunity for men and women to work together and gain mutual respect and friendship, and this friendship offers the highest bond in the film, overriding even the love of spouses. Several years ago policemen's wives protested their husbands riding around with female officers as partners while on patrol. They admittedly feared sexual entanglements. It is also likely that the wives might have feared an even stronger bond, the kind associated with male bonding, the bond of those who share many daily, and in the case of police work often traumatic, experiences.

Just as the workplace replaces home, co-worker bond replaces sex; it is stronger, less hierarchic and allows women (as is the case in ALIENS I and II) to make decisions and to have a say in their own fate. It even allows them to make mistakes, as Lewis does. In the police department hierarchy softens. The sergeant's problem with his subordinates is not that he abuses them but that he is so dedicated. When Lewis admits she erred by talking to Robocop, an act which leads Morton to demean the sergeant, the sergeant instantly forgives her; the two obviously have much affection and respect for each other, feelings totally absent from the corporate structure. The familial structure in the police department allows women

and blacks (like the sergeant) to rise according to their merit. True, Lewis is the one who gets the coffee, but she also makes decisions, some good, some near-fatal, and alternately gets to drive the car. Lewis reveals Murphy's name to him, holds up the mirror in which he sees his human face for the first time after his transformation, and helps him get his targeting back on track, directing his gun when he asks her to 'aim for me." She is also fiercely loyal; when Murphy suggests she leave before the final shootout, she refuses, saying, "We're partners." Lewis symbolizes the best human qualities Murphy must recapture: fidelity, love, hard work and even fallibility.

This bond is one of the vital forces missing from the corporate structure, as exemplified by the irony of Jones's remark in his death message on video to Morton, "We could have been friends." That friendship was, in fact, never a possibility to those climbing the corporate ladder. When Morton verbally attacks Jones in the bathroom, no one will stand by him; the washroom empties of all corporate employees when the two VPs confront each other. There are no lateral relationships, only hierarchic ones in the corporate world. The applause in the corporate meeting room is insincere and self-serving.

The film's advertising further exaggerates inauthentic feeling: the bright smiles of the nuclear family playing "Nukem" ("get them before they get you") or the fear on the faces of people watching Godzilla descend on their city in an ad for the Bank of California are exaggerated and falsified. In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings* sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, using the airline industry as the paradigmatic service industry, argues that service with a smile is a corporately managed image that alienates workers from their own feelings.[3] Analogous to 19th century industrial barons' notions of their workers as mere hands or bodies, modern corporations now attempt to control the feelings of their employees. Hochschild points out that in the modern world emotions and feelings are at the service of corporate power and greed for the sake of encouraging mass consumption, as service employees insincerely exhort us to "Have a nice day":

> "By linking standardization to honor and the suggestion of autonomy, the company can seem to say to the public, we control *this* much of the appearance and personality of *that* many people — which is a selling point that most companies strive for" (p. 103).

Murphy, like most service employees, presents polite, programmed, unfelt expressions of reason and happiness until he recaptures his feelings and acts with authenticity. Murphy's body language is a masterpiece of robotization and indicates the disunity of his mind and body. His uttered phrases are purely mechanical and cliched: he tells the stunned 7-11 owners, "Thank you for your cooperation," after he has blasted the armed robber into the glass doors of a beverage refrigerator. In the cocaine factory he asks Boddicker's workers and gang to drop their guns or "there will be trouble," understating the potential violence of the situation realized by the consequent shoot-out. When he changes direction, Murphy moves either his head or his body first, never the two together. He is completely controlled by programmed directives.

Yet, even before his recycling, Murphy was conditioned by the expectations and messages of corporation and media. Murphy learns to spin his gun to satisfy his

son's admiration for the TV cop R. Lazer in hopes of gaining his son's admiration. "Role models are important to a boy," Murphy assures Lewis, despite the fact that his son's role model is a TV hero and not Murphy. Verhoeven iconicizes this gesture, making it a sign of Murphy/Robocop's mythic and heroic qualities, exactly what it signifies in westerns. Murphy's gun twirling becomes his signature, his emblem of human vulnerability, his bond with his son and a sign to Lewis that Robocop is Murphy. This gesture is the one memory not removed by the corporation, his last link to his family and his former body, the communicator of his identity and the sign of his humanness. The other sign is his name: Morton tells Lewis that Robocop has no name, "he's a product," but Lewis helps Murphy recapture his identity. At the end when the president of OCP asks Robocop his name, he smiles and says, "Murphy." The final scene again echoes generations of westerns in which the hero's name becomes iconic (e.g., SHANE or the Lone Ranger).

Yet, despite his return to his identity with a new understanding of what his former life meant and the significance of his loss, the final scene demonstrates that Murphy is still the employee of the corporation. The two greedy, evil VPs are segregated from the corporation and from its president who remains untainted by greed and moral culpability, so that he can help Robocop in the end. He has risked nothing but instead

> "has a relation to the system of production that allows him to survive without risking his own embodied psyche, will, consciousness in that survival" (Scarry, p. 265).

For Marx the free attribute of nonparticipation characterized the role of "capitalist." Such liberation is not even available to OCP's Vice Presidents who must compete in a hostile environment and, like the police, are embodied in their work.

The president is disembodied, total spirit, the *deus* in the *deus ex machina* ending of the film. A good father ("Nice shootin', son," he tells Robocop), he fires Jones to remove the last programmed hurdle (that Robocop never attack an OCP employee) to killing Jones. As Jones is shot and plunges to his death from the meeting room window, OCP president and Murphy/Robocop are free to work together, presumably in rebuilding Detroit as Delta City and privatizing our entire infrastructure of social, military and health services. The disembodied president is freed from any taint of corruption despite the hostility, decadence and greed evinced by his two top VPs. The order restored in the film is the corporate order. Murphy's consciousness has not changed significantly; he never dissented from the ethos of advertising and corporate profit, and he will most likely get to share in the latter by the film's end.

The audience of the film, however, witnesses disturbing consequences of advertising hype, corporate calculations and product malfunctions which have so thoroughly failed us, despite Jones's warning that "the last thing we want is our products to turn against us." The profit motive undermines the seductive promises of capitalism. Just as Murphy can no longer enjoy his quiet suburban home and family, rewards promised to hard workers for their efforts and for living in a free enterprise United States, so, too, the very nature of capitalism allows it to be readily assimilated for any and all uses, such as drug production in a defunct steel

mill, simply substituting one industry for another. Discussing their underworld dealings, two members of Boddicker's gang call cocaine "capital investment." One member, Antonowsky, argues that free enterprise offers "another way to steal." Capitalist values are seamless in their application and offer a neutralizing amorality for any labor. Corporate presidents are heroes and role models; the grammar school Robocop visits is the Lee Iacocca Elementary School.

Yet, in this conflicting process of serving personal gain and social good, capitalism deconstructs itself. Manipulation of "value-free" capital flies in the face of democratic capitalism's stated and idealized intentions for material betterment and social progress. Defending this system means defending it against itself; its demise is from within, represented by the partnership of Jones and Boddicker. Those who serve in our burgeoning service economy, however, are caught in the middle of these contradictions and forced to serve polar opposite masters. For police officers, who fit no established category of worker (e.g., professional or unskilled), these contradictions make it impossible to serve at all, since it is so unclear what or who is being served. Dichotomous intentions of personal material benefit and social good are as incompatibly joined as the belief that OCP can make business out of non-profit enterprises; or the intention of OCP to eliminate crime in 40 days (according to the department of "Security Concepts") for the creation of "Delta City," a purified, crime-free Detroit. Commenting on the success of the company's ventures into non-profit enterprises, Jones says, "Business is where you find it." Boddicker repeats this remark to the mafioso Sal. The desires to do good and make money, scathingly presented in the parodic "I have a dream" speech of the president of OCP (and the supposed desires of Reaganomics to induce the private sector into social services) are the intentions of an irrational society uncommitted to its supposed ideals and ignorant of its real motives.

The synapse between these two irreconcilables is language, as readily appropriated as capital for any purpose. Through media and advertising language becomes disembodied from meaning.[4] The 6000 SUX luxury sports car signifies this disruption of words from a verifiable meaning in reality. Advertising's disembodied language which floats free of reality or truth can capitalize on anything, even turning failure into a valuable commodity and seducing us into adjusting our expectations down to fit incompetency. The most desired car, the 6000 SUX (sucks), is emblematic of inefficiency turned into merit for conspicuous consumption ("an American tradition, 8.2 miles per gal.").

The urban settings in the film feed on such misappropriations. The postmodern building which houses Omni Consumer Products is an image of contemporaneity and power. Despite the initial hope of postmodernist architects that their work would sustain a more affective, less monolithic corporate image, such a hope could not be realized. Corporate authority is imaged clearly in the pink cement and glass structure with its jutting, cantilevered forms reemerging in the body of the deadly ED-209. Modernity in all its clarity, rationality, and undecorated bluntness defines the buildings of OCP, Morton's apartment, Jones's grand office. Wishing to make expressive, "humane" architecture and serving multinational corporations are as mutually exclusive as the other contradictions inherent in capitalist economic aspirations in the film. The intentions of the architects to fuse modernity with feeling through allusions to tradition have only resulted in a more aggressive expression of corporate power.

Postmodern architecture also revived the art deco style, in its own day a style symbolizing modernity in machine-formed shapes and a conscious rejection of history and tradition. In its architecture and other ways, too, ROBOCOP is reminiscent of Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS (1926). The model of "Delta City" shows white, windowless monoliths recalling the extravagant settings of Lang's film, complete with Lang's highways in the air. Lang's workers are robotic in their behavior and living conditions, and the ultimate creation is a humanoid, the brainchild of a mad scientist in Lang's film. The Master of Metropolis, like the president of OCP, is disembodied and cannot feel sympathy for his workers. The conclusion of both films is a return to corporate order. Finally, Lang's film also uses the body metaphor:. The workers are the hands; the master of the city is the brain; and his son becomes the heart that links body and brain, according to the heroine of the film. More cynical than Lang, however, Verhoeven offers no easy synthesis and undercuts the return to order by his continual reminders that the order is incompetent and entropic.

The images of the city, the model of Delta City, and the 6000 SUX all express the ironies in the choice of Detroit as site. The reputation of Detroit rests on both murder and the automobile industry as a barometer of our economic well-being. The film's Detroit has passed into its current state of collapse: the dismantled car industry, which in the 1920s invited workers by the 1000s, mostly Southern blacks, to a new life, and then rose to become a symbol of American prosperity and know-how. Now it stands for technological incompetence and the deficit in our exports and imports of the automobile, the product as central to the American Dream as the suburban home.

The most examined interior is Murphy's former suburban home which he re-visits in the process of rediscovering his past. Recalling the warmth and affection of his family life, his memory is a foil for the face and voice of a realtor ("Welcome Shoppers") on a repeating video that recites a sales pitch on the features of the house but not the home of Murphy's former, unexamined life in a beautiful suburb on 548 Primrose Lane, a neighborhood "with a growth factor of 7." The home is empty except for some remaining detritus. Its interior is contemporary, white walls and polished black brickwork around the fireplace, an old-fashioned hearth in a modern home more efficiently heated by gas. Murphy's memory revives images of rooms filled with *Better Homes and Gardens* furniture, and three brass pots on the mantel, reflecting recent nostalgic taste for brass. The large, kneeling brass deer combines current taste for art deco and kitsch sculpture of wild animals. Equally kitsch is the broken coffee cup inscribed "World Class Husband." These manufactured objects sustain Murphy's affective life as memorials to his Edenic world before the fall into corporate hands. Experiencing a profound sense of loss, Murphy smashes the TV screen and the video realtor to defy the advertising hype's false presentation of life as forever rosy and its failure to capture deeper emotions beyond surface sentimentality.

The furniture Murphy remembers represents the domestic extension of our body. Marx expresses this relationship in terms of our appropriation of the natural world and our own products:

> "Thus, originally *property* means no more than man's attitude to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as the

prerequisites of his own existence; his attitude to them as *natural prerequisites* of himself, which constitute, as it were, a prolongation of his body."[5]

Marx interpreted the entire made world and all its objects as extensions of our individual and collective bodies. Workers project themselves into the world in the making of that world, while capitalists, on the other hand, are disembodied. In the 19th century Marx saw the two classes as discreet and opposite; the workers were starving, suffering, unable to afford the objects they made which would have extended their bodies and provided them with food, shelter, pleasure. In the United States in this century workers project their bodies into products they *can* afford; here and now workers reap the material rewards of their labor. The model has not changed so neatly, however, since it still defines the relationship between U.S. and Western European consumers and the Third World workers who work and live in 19th century Industrial Revolution conditions, hungry, cold, deprived of even the basic amenities made possible by the products they make but cannot afford to consume.[6] For Marx making characterizes our essential humanness and brings us bodily expansion and the joy of creation, both now perverted by capital.

Goods and capital substitute for social and emotional bonds in the film. One repeated example of this social substitution of money for love or feeling is in the interspersed sitcom in which the male lead, about to have sex with two women (which Morton tries to engage in, life imitating art, before he is executed by Boddicker), says he'd "buy that for a dollar." The pervasiveness of this image is thorough: members of the Boddicker gang love to watch this show, as does the old owner of the 7-11 store which is robbed while he is watching it. One of Morton's co-workers, an executive who welcomes Morton "to the club," repeats the punch line. The sitcom pervades and homogenizes all desires of all classes, as does advertising. Both aim for broad public appeal for profit.

The products we consume further define our social selves and our relation to the world of objects. A car does more than get us from place to place; it establishes status in the hierarchy (for which reason Boddicker blows up the 6000 SUX of his gang member, since his subordinate cannot have the same quality car as Boddicker). It stands for a wealth of values and gives back to the human owner more than was embodied in the mere physical car by the workers who made it or the inventor who conceived it. The longer cars have been around, the more values they accrue; and this is true for the other major objects in the film, especially videos and weaponry. We name our cars and guns. Antonowsky's only expression of affection occurs when, upon getting his latest military weapon, he says, "I *like* it."

The joint promises of advertising and technology to replace our bodies with hi-tech products (wittily described in the Family Heart Center ad for the new Jansen series 7 sports heart, of the Yamaha, both available for tax health credit) articulate a new interpretation of the body. Our bodies do not signify character, selfhood, nor even our status or ethnic origins. Just as emotions are exaggerated and falsified in advertising and in the corporate meeting room, so, too, our bodies can be manufactured part by part and in the future, as the movie implies, completely replaced. We are at the brink of controlling our immortality. Ironically, we are also able to control our death, since death appears in the film to come from our own

products. The interspersed TV newscasts report a series of malfunctions and accidents that resonate with our memory of the footage of the Space Shuttle disaster or of the victims of the nuclear leak at Chernobyl or the gas leak at Bopal: in the film the Star Wars Defense Program's Peace Platform laser malfunctions and sets fire to the wooded area around Santa Barbara killing 113 people including two retired presidents, one of whom (Reagan?) probably created SDI; the South African government claims to have a neutron bomb it promises readily to use against dissenting blacks. Ads, too, reflect the assimilation of disaster technology even into the bosom of warm, loving family life: family games include "Nukem" in which family members destroy each other much as competing nations will certainly do given nuclear capabilities. The film itself indulges its own voyeurism as the toxic waste drum's contents cover Antonowsky and mutate his body into a hideous leprous form before our very eyes.

Our bodies expand into a wealth of goods, generating a reciprocity between ourselves and the consumer products that transform our bodies and consequently our psyches. Robocop's body recapitulates all the medico-technological advances promised by advertisements. He is the sum of a data bank of police experience, quick reflexes, expert programming, the latest technology and research. He is our bodies as artifact, the sum of our labor and the reward for it. He is the one who saves, serves and protects us and our bodies and the extension of our bodies, our private property. Such created objects also alter the knowledge and expectations we have of our own bodies transformed by clothes, eyeglasses, hearing aids, implanted joints and organs, cars, appliances. The extent of our physical transformation can be underestimated; not only do we see, hear, feel better or run faster, but our artifacts present and define our reality. They speak us and the world.

Conversely, our bodies also become artifacts, once they are changed (Scarry, p. 244). As Engels points out, the hand is not only the organ of labor, but the product of that labor. It has evolved into an artifact alter years of doing a variety of refined work. The most obvious examples of the body's modification into artifact are the vastly faster athletes, stronger and with more stamina, doing more difficult tricks than athletes could do or *could conceive of doing* before steroids and nautilus machines. Robocop's creation is the pinnacle of our self-definition as artificers. He is the consequence of the artificial hearts, eyes, limbs, grafts with which we have so far healed and replicated ourselves. We accept these synthetic parts because we define ourselves as makers (Scarry, p. 254). Robocop, the ultimate artifice, epitomizes our evolution.

Yet, Murphy gradually recovers his memory, identity and will, until his actions are no longer simply programmed but are affected by his own desires, wishes, hatreds. As these changes occur, his reflexes lag (fast reflexes are cited by both Jones and Morton in praise of their respective robots). Thoughts, feelings and memories intercept his programming to slow him down. About to shoot Antonowsky whom he catches robbing a gas station, Robocop falters and lowers his gun, while Antonowsky tries to escape; Robocop is hampered by Antonowsky's words, "We killed you," and by the memory of his "death." While reading Boddicker his rights, Murphy/Robocop throws him through a series of windows, for the first time revealing Boddicker's vulnerability and Murphy's desire for revenge. Murphy/Robocop almost kills Boddicker but is stopped by his arrest mode, which he will later overcome at the end of the film to kill Boddicker. Murphy's

vulnerability signals the union of his body and his mind.

By the end of the film, Murphy's mechanical body becomes his own, as well. He repairs himself with pliers and drill before the final shootout. Between his rebirth and his synthetic resurrection Murphy has gained feeling and free will, owning himself as the means of production and gaining self-determination. During the final shoot out, Murphy's head and body work together in a new coordination. From the top floor of the warehouse he moves in one direction but watches Boddicker from another direction. His head — now uncovered so we can see his human face — turns toward Boddicker while Murphy walks along the balcony, his head and body coordinated at 45 degrees to each other.

While Murphy gains self-determination and deprograms himself, the ubiquitous corporation suffers continual internal breakdowns. In the opening of the film, the dominant rule of law, Murphy's Law, "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong" (and its infinite variations, such as the Peter Principle), is set into motion by the malfunctioning of Jones's ED-209. Everyone expects Murphy's Law to preside, and the corporation anticipates failure by having back-up projects, though these back-ups undermine the main project by existing within the framework of cutthroat ambition. The corporation's safeguard is its undoing.

Our only hope, after all, is that Robocop will embody Murphy's Law. The ultimate irony in the film is that applying Marx's hope that the workers' bodies can be protected, extended, expanded through their labors' products, Americans live in a world in which we, the only workers of the world who can reap the benefits by consuming mass quantities, reap only the benefits of destruction by malfunction. And the destruction is total. Morton's benefits end in death as do Boddicker's and Jones'. The only hope left is that Robocop *will* malfunction as he is reprogrammed by memory, feeling and self-determination, his renewed human values.

Verhoeven advances no solutions to the tremendously complex social, economic, political and technological problems the film poses, and the film retreats into a reestablishment of a now-cleaner corporate order and status quo. The complexity retreats further in the face of the polymorphous eroticism of consumer goods, shiny, new, fast, sleek, progressive. We are left, instead, with hopes pinned on a synthesis of human affections and hi-tech invulnerability, an everyman hero whose name is as common as breakdowns. The dim hope proffered is that a synthesis of biology and technology might concoct the best of all possible glitches.

NOTES

I dedicate this article to Ethan Granger who, as a man of the 21st century, understands so much of this world's technology in all its deadly and hopeful possibilities.

1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

2. This lack of an adequate vocabulary for pain has become a focus of medical ethics, and is at the heart of patient-doctor relationships. To the one feeling pain, it is certain; to the one hearing about the pain, it is dubious. Doctor and patient have diametrically opposed responses to the patient's pain.

3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

4. Regina Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) describes the strategies of artists to resist and exploit advertising and the new public language at the end of the 19th century; Gagnier argues convincingly that Oscar Wilde, among others, was acutely aware of the effects of this advertising language on the arts, the last bastion, he hoped, of purity, and that much of Wilde's wit was in subverting this language through puns that, instead of reinforcing bourgeois values, attacked them. The most explicit denunciation of this language, of course, appears in George Orwell's concept of doublespeak in *1984.*

5. From *Grundrisse*, trans. Jack Cohen (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 89.

6. John Berger in *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), discusses in detail the complex relationship between art making, the myth of the artist-creator, and the capitalist glue holding together Western industrial nations and Third World countries.

Robocop
In the ditritus of hi-technology

by Steven Best

> "We now live in the detritus of high-technology." — Arthur Kroker[1]
> [open notes in new window]

With LA BAMBA, ROBOCOP became the sleeper hit of summer 1987. Audiences thrilled to its relentless action and spectacle and roared at its outrageous, dark humor. Interestingly, as ROBOCOP played in our local theaters, another black comedy, the Iran/Contra affair, played on television in our living rooms. Within our media society, where reality and unreality freely intermingle, the ROBOCOP character of a benign corporate president unaware of his subordinates' takeover seemed to have its real life parallel in Ronald Reagan, supposedly ignorant of the North-Secord coup.

In its narrative structure and in its sets, ROBOCOP represents a complex genre mix, using a pastiche of elements drawn from the sci-fi, gangster, romance, and western genres. ROBOCOP's story line is this: A Detroit police officer named Murphy gets "killed" in action. The remnants of his body are transformed into a cyborg super-cop, programmed to restore law and order. The city is a futurist, post-industrial Detroit, a nightmare world besieged by urban conflicts. Although Robocop had his memory erased, a former partner calls him by name, "Murphy," and he seeks out information about his own past and sets out to revenge his own "death," caused by gangsters and a high-tech corporation.

In addition to mixing genres, ROBOCOP mixes high and low art. This Hollywood "trash" flick is the U.S. film debut of the distinguished Dutch director Paul Verhoeven, whose critically acclaimed work includes TURKISH DELIGHT (1973), SOLDIER OF ORANGE (1978), SPETTERS (1981), THE FOURTH MAN (1983), and FLESH AND BLOOD (1985). Verhoeven initially rejected ROBOCOP's script as "just an action script" (*New York Times*, 7/24/87). On subsequent reading, however, he saw in it philosophical themes — the Christian themes of death, resurrection, and redemption — and agreed to do the film. Before making the film, Verhoeven studied contemporary action classics such as THE TERMINATOR and RAMBO to learn the editing and the pace of the Hollywood blockbuster genre (*Chicago Tribune*, 9/2/87). Verhoeven's visual skills and predilection for filmic violence allowed him a smooth transition into the Hollywood fantasy factory.

While ROBOCOP is an action spectacle, a romance, a comedy, and a revenge fantasy, it is also a complex, subversive, and even utopian text which addresses the problem of human alienation within a techno-capitalist society. I will analyze the film in terms of what I find to be its three dominant critical themes — capitalism, media, and technology. I will then read the ways in which the film critiques our society and discuss its utopian themes. Finally, I will show how ROBOCOP fails as a critical text and still affirms the capitalism and conservatism it sets out to criticize.

CAPITAL AND THE GAME OF LIFE

Early on in the film we are introduced to the key members of OCP, OmniConsumer Products, a large corporation with ties to the military. OCP has a contract to run the Detroit police department. OCP's president is a visionary capitalist intent on commandeering the new opportunities afforded by current urban gentrification and privatization of social services. Dick Jones is a malevolent vice-president who usurps control of the company. And Bob Morton is a ruthless, self-aggrandizing yuppie hacking his way to the top.

The president proudly unveils the latest OCP plan — they will construct the futurist "Delta City." To guarantee that no disorder disturbs this corporate-managed metropolis, Vice-President Jones introduces a robot designed to replace an inefficient human police force. His robot, ED209, is programmed for "urban pacification." Jones demonstrates this cop-of-tomorrow at a corporate board meeting, where he asks a junior executive to simulate a hold-up.[2] The robot issues the man a vigorous warning to drop the gun but when the frightened employee does so, ED209 malfunctions and brutally kills him. When the president expresses grave "disappointment" in Jones, department head Bob Morton steps forward with a new plan, involving the construction of a cyborg. As he gets the approval of the president, he incurs the wrath of the displaced Jones.

This melodrama provides the frame for the film's critique of corporate capital. The president's opening words present OCP as the rational, humanitarian, and innovative corporation of the future. However, we soon see that OCP, under Jones' control, acts as an evil monopoly, profiting from crime, not eliminating it. The contrast between Jones and the President is used as a dramatic device to critique the ideology of enterprise and development, but only, as I will show, to eventually reconstruct it.

Capital's expansion has an underlying ethic, and this is revealed in the characters of the archrivals, the VP Jones and the younger executive, Morton. Morton, too, is ultra-competitive and callous toward his fellow employees. When his colleague is killed by ED209, Morton writes it off as "life in the big city." In response to the damage he inflicts on the older Jones' career, Morton says, "He's old, we're young, and that's life." But Morton, in fact, "fucked with wrong guy," as Jones tells him in a menacing washroom encounter. When it becomes clear to Jones that Morton threatens his own position, he hires a gangster to murder Morton.

Throughout ROBOCOP, human lives are readily disposable in the quest for profit and money mediates all personal relations. In a gross visual metaphor about the corruption of human relations, the film repeatedly returns to the TV show of the future, a sex farce/game show where the lascivious host's eyes bulge out amidst the

mammoth female breasts surrounding him. Over and over he says, "I'd buy that for a dollar!" Everything comes cheap in the techno-capitalist world of ROBOCOP.

The film uses this game metaphor in other ways. Morton's murderer plays a video to him made by Jones, who says wryly from the TV screen before Morton dies, "Think of it as a game, Bob. Every game has a winner and a loser. I'm cashing you in." Here ROBOCOP shows what "game theory," so dear to bourgeois academics, actually amounts to in practice: Social Darwinism is a fundamental aspect of both capitalist ideology and popular imagination. Bourgeois individualism turns life into a game where basic rights and freedoms have to be "won" rather than granted. The unfortunate losers and non-players must simply accept their status as unskilled social actors, in fact, without rights.

To buttress this attack on bourgeois ideology, the film also constructs its narrative around the theme of theft, seeing "free enterprise" as a self-legitimated system of theft. Members of the Boddicker gang, which killed Murphy, wonder why they bother with bank robberies when "there's no better way to steal money than free enterprise." In addition to its representation as legalized plunder, free enterprise is also portrayed as an anarchic, Hobbesian war of all against all. In one of the film's hilarious news scenes, a "man in the street" interviewee says, "It's a free society, except there ain't nothin' free. There's no guarantees, you know. You're on your own. It's the law of the jungle."

Through such sustained satire, ROBOCOP builds one of the strongest cases against monopoly capitalism yet delivered by Hollywood. And by having constantly inserted fictionalized TV shows into its narrative, it critiques this system's main cultural support, the media.

MEDIATED "REALITIES"

ROBOCOP often cuts from events in Detroit and the rest of the world to their mediated TV news representation, itself represented within the film. This "play within the play" works to show how "objective" media reports are, in fact, ideological constructions.

ROBOCOP begins with a newscast which brilliantly critiques the genre. The news' slogan is, "You give us three minutes, and we'll give you the world." The news offers a hyper-intensified compression of social and political reality to miniscule sound bytes, here only slightly more absurd than today's thirty minute newscasts (which have only 10-12 minutes of actual news). Journalistic objectivity is itself problematic with its time constraints, dramatic codes, and ideological frames that filter the "reality" represented. ROBOCOP also shows how the news makes all events seem "equal" in the cycle of image exchange. After reporting a key political event, the newscasters simply smile and move on to the next issue as though everything had the same insipid value. This satire works because it only slightly exaggerates what real newscasts now do — just enough to expose the artificiality of TV news codes without appearing too unbelievable. It provokes audience reflection on an important contemporary issue: how the news reduces information to entertainment.

The events represented in these media scenes are scripted to match the film's overall cynical attitude and buttress its critique of technology, particularly of SDI

and nuclear weapons, which are featured in every news scene. The first news scene brings us reports from South Africa, where the ruling white government may use nuclear weapons against the black insurrection. Then we see a story about the first Presidential press conference from a Star War's "peace platform," which was interrupted by a power failure. Then there's a commercial break, brought to us by "The Family Heart Center," where a capitalist medical institution of the future offers "a complete line of hearts," which have brand names including "Yamaha."

The second media tableau occurs midway through the film. At this point, Robocop has had success on the crime-infested streets of Detroit. He is now a media hero. The news shows him with a group of children at "Lee Iacoca Elementary School," a satiric comment on the media's hero worship of a mediocre capitalist manager backed by U.S. government capital. When asked for advice, Robocop warns the children, "Stay out of trouble," i.e., obey social laws and norms. In another segment, Morton appears on TV and predicts the end of crime within forty days, thanks to their new "security concepts" system based on Robocop. Finally we see that elsewhere in the world, the U.S. and Mexican governments cooperate to smash a revolution in Acapulco. The commercial accompanying this news program advertises a new game, NUKE'M, where family members can act out destruction fantasies together and nuke their opponents if their imagined political differences prove unresolvable.

The third and last news tableau comes after Robocop has broken free from Metro West police station to pursue his killers. The news reports that the Detroit police have gone on strike and that an SDI laser satellite has accidentally fired upon multiple points on earth, creating a raging forest fire and killing two ex-presidents in Santa Barbara (one of which, no doubt, would have been Reagan). As I discuss below, this particular newscast gives a specific focus to the film's critique of technology.

Television figures in ROBOCOP in other ways. Television sets displaying the sexcom appear as a recurring visual motif. The thugs, besides being bloodthirsty killers, are also inveterate couch potatoes. One thug is so attuned to the hyper-reality of the tube that when he stands before an electronics store while Detroit is being looted, he, too, smashes a window. But he only wants to turn up the sound of the sexcom, with its slogan, "I'd buy that for a dollar!"

The postmodern privileging of TV reality over "real" reality (to contrast them is only to make an analytic distinction) is again evident early in the film. The real cop Murphy, cajoled by his son, learns a twirling gun trick from the TV cop T.J. Laser (himself a robot). For Murphy's son, pop is not a "real" cop unless he simulates the unreal actions of TV heroes, an accommodation Murphy doesn't mind at all. Indeed, Murphy and his partner, the tough female cop Lewis, seem to be acting out fantasies of invulnerable TV cops when they chase criminals into an abandoned steel mill without any backup, much as U.S. soldiers went into Vietnam with images of John Wayne storming the hill in their minds. Once inside the building, he and his tough female partner, Lewis, both strike stereotypical cop poses, and almost gleefully, Murphy walks into his death trap.

Where do these poses come from? Are they what "real" cops do? Are they media exaggerations? Or do real cops pick up these poses from media representations of their roles? It becomes a hyper-real role with no identifiable origin. Murphy's

alacrity to adopt a TV simulation of cops as a model suggests that his transformation into Robocop is not as sharp a division from his former self as one might initially think. In a sense, Murphy was already "Robocop," a simulacrum following the programming of law and order. But, as Jean Baudrillard notes, "Law and order themselves might be nothing more than a simulation," alibis for the fact that everything in late capitalism is chaotic and corrupt (ibid., p. 38).

TECHNOLOGY AND REIFICATION

ROBOCOP's sharpest criticism is directed not against media or capitalism per se, but against technology. In the film's paranoid world, technology reigns supreme and out of control. The movie shows humans trying to master nature but ultimately failing. We often see technological failures: for example, ED209 made a wrong response to a simulated holdup; later it could not climb down stairs to pursue Robocop.

Robocop, too, cannot be controlled. He cleverly finds ways to override his programming, which forbids him to arrest any OCP executive by killing both the vice-lord Bottinger and OCP's Jones. Despite his programming, some of his memory returns. He develops a will of his own as he escapes from the police station. At the film's end, he regains his personal identity as "Murphy." Despite all corporate attempts to produce a flawless machine, a perfect technological simulation of a cop, the human component returns — with a vengeance. Robocop is a postmodern Frankenstein who rebels against his technocratic creators.

There is a powerfully ironic moment toward the end of the film. As Robocop and Lewis lay wounded, having successfully battled the Boddicker gang, Robocop says: "They'll fix you. They fix everything." But it is clear at this point that "they" — the technocrats — cannot fix everything, and Robocop sarcastically is referring to how brutally they had "fixed" him.

At this level, ROBOCOP attempts to present its main message. Failed robot technology is a *metaphor for and warning against* the policies and attitudes behind the U.S. government's SDI. This program assumes that a failsafe nuclear "protection" device can be created to scientifically manage world conflicts. It is no accident then that the "news" inside the film shows SDI actually misfiring.

Most generally, ROBOCOP tries to voice a warning against "technicism,"[3] an ideology which sees technology as the solution to all problems and seeks unqualified technical mastery of the world. The postmodern world has seen the victory of what Canadian theorist George Grant, following Nietzsche, has termed the "will to will," willing purely for its own sake; that is, for the sake of technology. This "will to will" would nihilistically absorb human morals and values within the unlimited, autonomous movement of technology. It's philosophically the completion of Enlightenment logic. Whereas technology has always constituted an important aspect of human existence in postmodern culture, it seems to delimit our existence and inform our most basic attitudes and experience. It marginalizes all other languages, recasting all values in a means/ends schema of maximum efficiency. It sees all problems — be they the "disorders" of the personal or social body — resolvable through technology.

Ultimately, technology's goal is to replace natural life with machines and create an

artificial, processed environment. Although prone to exaggeration, Jean Baudrillard has provocatively described the increasing technological-semiotic mediation of our experience. We gradually have become immersed in an hermetic universe of signs, consumption, technique, cybernetic codes and models. Baudrillard's narrative about "simulation" not only helps us to understand the eclipse of the human life-world, but his distinction between the automaton and the robot and provides a conceptual space in which to locate the historical specificity of ROBOCOP.

According to Baudrillard, the automaton belongs to the first "classical period" of simulation, the "counterfeit era," which begins in the Renaissance and ends in the "industrial era." Previously in the symbolic era of feudal society, signs were non-arbitrary and referred to persons with distinct social obligations. With the bourgeois revolution, signs became "democratic" and arbitrary, referring only to their own "disenchanted signifieds," now simulating an obligation and referent to the real world (*Simulations*, p.85).

The arbitrary sign is the beginning of semiological hegemony, the triumph of signs over reality. Within this world, the automaton is still seen as being in the realm of analogy and resemblance, still bound up with the metaphysics of being and appearance. The social and psychological distinction between human and machine is still maintained, as is the distinction between truth and falsehood, being and appearance.

The robot belongs to the next stage of simulation, the industrial era with its infinite multiplication of identical objects within a series. The robot liquidates the "otherworldly" metaphysics of being and appearance and brings everything into the strictly technical logic of production, ruled by exchange value. Unlike the automaton, the robot is not the analogy of "man," but his equivalent. Both are serialized simulacra.

ROBOCOP goes one step further and offers us the cyborg, which must belong to the third stage of simulation, the era of "hyperreality." Here, images, signs, and codes dominate and engulf objective reality. Robocop is the product of cybernetics, media, and simulation. In the Baudrillard scheme, Robocop would be neither the analogy of "man" nor his equivalent, but a computer-generated simulation that surpasses man. This "part man, part robot" is a prosthetic being in a prosthetic age, where signs are "realer-than-real" and stand in for the world they erase. The film emphasizes the scientific/medical replacement of human parts. This not only graphically represents our technological present, and future reality, but it becomes a metaphor for the replacement of nature, reality and society. We seem to be living in and headed for a technologically processed, automated, consumer world which continually proliferates signs and simulacra. "Everything is obliterated only to begin again," resurrected within technique (*Simulations*, p. 22). The sudden rebirth of Murphy as Robocop speaks to the mutation of our age, seeing in it the age of mutation.

POSTMODERN BODIES

Robocop is the perfect metaphor of our postmodern condition and postmodern bodies. He represents, first, what Frederic Jameson has termed the "waning of affect."[4] Jameson is not referring to a death of emotions, but to the reduction of

the expressivist energies of modernism (such as angst) to a flat, monotonous, solipsistic and lifeless plane, a robotization of the life-world. In one sense, Jameson is describing how cultural productions mechanize emotions. Thus Robocop's blank stares *from* the video screen parallel our dull gaze *into* it. But, in another sense, Jameson is also describing the explosion of emotions into a diffuse, socially schizoid world. This is the sensation Robocop comes to know when jolted by memories of his former self; he experiences his former life-world reduced to staccato bursts of conflicting "intensities."

Robocop represents both the waning of affect and the technification of the human body. He is the fantasy expression of our new "technobodies" (Arthur Kroker), "half-metal, half-flesh" (George Grant), a completely "new man" who is daily "x-rayed by television" (Marshall McLuhan), a video being whose very body is transformed into some sort of "operational screen" (Jean Baudrillard).

Drawing from Marshall McLuhan, Arthur Kroker describes the current technological dialectic.[5] First, we find the full and final exteriorization of our senses in technology-the "technological extensions" (McLuhan) of human experience. If the wheel was an extension of the human foot, then informational technologies are an extension of our central nervous system (as Samuel Morse was the first to point out) and the computer is an extension of our brain. Modern electronic technologies bring about a final exteriorization of the senses and "complete the cycle of mechanization of the human sensorium."[6]

According to McLuhan the (technological) environment is not a passive container but a dynamic shaping process which "works us over completely," altering not only our social relations but our very "ratio of senses." The technological sensorium, which has been produced as a simulation of the human body, returns to encompass the body. In particular, we no longer experience a substantial distance between the body and its technological extensions, so that we feel one with Sony Walkmans and IBM computer screens, as well as with the semiotic excess of by consumer capital. [7]

In this merger, the human being becomes increasingly subjected to a technical apparatus that substitutes a language of codes and processed information for "natural experience." Mostly, as an experience, it has gone unnoticed. Earlier, this process motivated McLuhan's theorizing as he attempted to shock us into a heightened awareness of technology's and media's transformative power. Now, we're approaching a closed system, and the system itself adapts us to its workings. "[T]he new media...are nature."[8] As a technified, schizoid subject, Robocop symbolizes the disintegration of the bourgeois humanist ego.

But ROBOCOP can be read at still a more literal level. Technobodies are becoming a real possibility as genetic engineering moves closer to the simulation/ reproduction of life. As we move into the twenty-first century, science not only has been able to substitute technology for biology (artificial hearts, etc.) but seems capable of simulating life itself through technological creation (genetic splicing). This is a giant step beyond McLuhan's concept of technological extensions of the body. Is the brave new world of full technological simulation only a matter of time? What is certain is that the scientization of capital and the capitalization of science brush ethical questions aside. Especially in the military and medical fields, a new "ethics" has emerged based on technological imperatives.

UTOPIAN PROJECTIONS

ROBOCOP seems intensely aware of our new "postmodern condition." It articulates the fear of a completely alienated, rationalized, mechanical world where human beings and their body parts are technologically processed, where simulation approaches perfection, where emotions are lacking, where the ego is in ruins, and where personal identity is absent. The fear conveyed by ROBOCOP is two-fold: that human beings will be replaced by machines (automation) and that human beings are becoming machines (alienation). We may be becoming spiritually and emotionally lifeless rationalists as well as technologically processed and simulated beings. Both developments augur the end of the life-world, about which ROBOCOP sounds an important warning.

Importantly, ROBOCOP not only dramatizes the results of untrammeled technological development, it resists the fatalism of critics like Baudrillard, who concludes that the Subject has lost its battle with the Object and so should surrender. While ROBOCOP depicts a post-catastrophic, technified world, it also suggests that technology cannot achieve its goal. The corporation does not gain a perfectly enclosed, self-referential police system, robot strategies do not necessarily succeed, and the human subject is not so easily erased. Robocop struggles to understand what has happened to him and who he is. He identifies with his former human self entrapped within the steel body. He rebels against his corporate creators; and he forges his own will against any technological determination. These constitute the utopian moments of this film. ROBOCOP dramatizes the resilience of a subject, albeit a cyborg, amidst the most incredibly reified and subjugating conditions. The film allegorizes the robot's attempts to find meaning and, value within a corrupt world. The film preserves a moment of struggle and refusal.

Thus, the *dystopian* projection of a hyper-alienated future coincides with an *utopian* hope for spiritual salvation and redemption. In an interview published in *The New York Times* (7/24/87), director Paul Verhoeven stated that ROBOCOP "is about losing your soul, even part of your body, and then being resurrected into a new body, which is a very Christian thing, isn't it?" Verhoeven is expressing the utopian aspect of Christianity, which drew him to the film. Where subjectivities are increasingly in peril, within conditions of technological control and consumerist pathology, the search for human identity and human meaning becomes a necessary precondition for an emancipatory politics. Thus, as George Grant saw, any movement that seeks to transcend the present technological horizon must begin by re-forming human identity.[9] ROBOCOP poses this problem, but it in no way provides an adequate solution.

THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVE

ROBOCOP offers a powerful critique of high-tech corporate U.S.A. and its scientistic ideology; a vivid portrayal of corporate corruption, bureaucracy, and its profit imperative; a dramatic narrative about how social values become subsumed under the abstract powers of science; and an affirmation of subjectivity over technocratic and bureaucratic alienation. Nevertheless, the film is still problematic and reactionary on other counts.

Ultimately, ROBOCOP cannot project anything beyond fear of and paranoia toward

the impending brave new world. A key weakness of the film is its one-dimensional, technophobic attitude toward automation. ROBOCOP gives us a powerful critique of technicism, but it cannot see how people could have a positive relation to technology. It creates a metaphysics of technology, in which technology is the evil which erases our human essence, substituting its artificial machinery for our natural being. The film remains locked with the bourgeois drama of "man" vs. machine, without undoing this opposition. It could have suggested the possibility of a humanized and socialized technology. Thus, if ROBOCOP understands the alienation of technology, it doesn't see how compulsory labor is also alienating and how automation must figure into any future emancipation.

The film is most reactionary in its treatment of crime. It shows crime as the anarchic danger of the future. At a fundamental level, ROBOCOP's narrative, controlled by its capitulation to traditional genre form, is articulated around the binaries good vs. evil and order vs. disorder. It tries to convey a picture of a moribund urban metropolis ravaged by crime and anarchy. Because of its genre form, it lacks any historical context, which would let us analyze the crisis-ridden nature of late capitalism as the ultimate cause of social disorder.

At one point in the film, Sargeant Reed responds to a strike proposal by saying: "Without cops, the city would tear itself apart." ROBOCOP projects the need for a Leviathan bureaucracy to subdue and civilize the masses. It satirizes everything but the pathological need for security and order. At this level it seems to provide reactionary affirmation of the demand for Social Order. In that way, the film's depiction of crime neatly coalesces with rightwing fantasies of social subversion and the Reagan/Meese program, in which the fight against crime and drugs becomes a front for increased surveillance and the rollback of constitutional rights. Without exception, every bad guy in the film becomes vanquished by the forces of good, paradigmatically represented by the uncorruptable Robocop (though it may be an ironic comment or even an unwitting argument for automation that it takes a machine civil servant to attain true moral status).

ROBOCOP takes us through an orgy of pity and fear. It teaches the lesson that good always wins. It tells us that social order is possible only through the imposition and acceptance of external authority and that, most importantly, *a moribund capitalism is more desirable than any alternative world which might emerge from its destruction.*

This key shortcoming of the film is consistent with its liberalism, its inability to locate the real sources of alienation and reification. At no moment does ROBOCOP suggest that the numerous serious social issues it raises — from nuclear disaster to monopoly control — are inherent in or fundamentally related to the corporate system it critiques. The president is portrayed as an unknowing and unwitting dupe of the VP Jones' usurpation of OCB. In relation to the evil Jones, the president stands as the rational and beneficent capitalist who wants to bring us a better tomorrow. His position and function are never questioned.

In this way, the film's end legitimates and exonerates the corporate system by reducing the structural problems of late capitalism to issues of individual psychology. The film could have shown the entire corporate leadership as engaged in corruption and public deception (surely not stretching the truth). Or it could have made an explicit connection between SDI corporate research, and the profit

imperative. Instead, it only condemns greed and ambition at the level of personal values. Jones' evil allows for the narrative recuperation of the capitalist system. As it stands, ROBOCOP does not offer a structural critique of capitalism, but a bourgeois morality play which affirms rational capitalism, moral virtues, and (in its sentimentalized portrayal of Murphy's home life), the traditional family.

But, of course, to demand a structural social critique is asking far too much of mainstream film. Ultimately, the inherent limits of the Hollywood industry and its traditional narrative form prevent more radical critiques. In ROBOCOP we see the usual contradiction between progressive textual encodings and traditional narrative form. Beneath Robocop's steel flesh, inside his computerized brain, there lies the old bourgeois ego, rising phoenix-like from its ruination in the postmodern technoscape, unified and complete in the totality of its memory. Robocop's resurrection as Murphy — that final moment when he smiles and reclaims his former human name/self — is an outrageous capitulation to genre form. It climactically completes the metaphysics of closure, resolution, and redemption that structures the film. This moment is not satirized. It suggests Murphy's complete recovery of the lost content of his human identity, the erasure of his angst despite his destroyed physicality and life-world, the resolution of any damning schizophrenia. The themes of human identity and technological reification are expressed within a logic beyond social critique, that is, within a narrative of redemption. The final scene might have contained pathos and poignancy, as we wondered where this metaphysically homeless being could go next, perhaps seeking out a life amidst the ruins of industrial modernity. Instead, we know that everything will be all right and we can imagine that Robocop — like all hero-redeemers — although walking alone, walks happily, perhaps still rounding up the bad guys. For he has become the morally aware gunslinger he has always wanted to be.

ROBOCOP attacks the audience's complacent beliefs in capitalism, media, and technology, but it also simultaneously draws them into the powerful spectacle of its redemption/ revenge narrative and its unremitting graphic violence. It encourages both a critical reflection on its political themes and an uncritical consumption of its visual drama. The audience experiences both reflexive distantiation and affective participation in the spectacle. The dual objectives to satirize and entertain, critique and make money, provoke thought and contain it, make this film highly uneven and ambiguous.

The film has, on the thematic level, conflicting strains of conservative and progressive ideology. On another level, all thematic encodings vie for attention with the film's excessive spectacle, both in ROBOCOP's narrative drama and in its visual intensity. While there can be no question that the visual and narrative spectacle of ROBOCOP might predominate over its critical encodings (and so decodings), it would be wrong to conclude (e.g., as do many postmodern critics) that all thematic content is occluded.[10] This presupposes too mechanical a view of how people view films, and it obscures the socializing aspects of mass media texts. Every viewer will no doubt decode ROBOCOP in a different way. Some will find support for their conservative belief in the need for order or hero redeemers. Others will be mesmerized by the sheer spectacle of the film and come away only with a remembrance of its surface pleasures. For still others, the film will sharpen — or awaken — their skepticism toward media, capitalism, and technology.

NOTES

1. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984), p. 30. In the section on technology which follows below I am much indebted to Kroker.

2. "Go and organize a fake hold-up...But you won't succeed: the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with the real elements." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 39.

3. This is Arthur Kroker's term. For Kroker, technicisme is "an urgent belief in the historical inevitability of the fully realized technological society," the symbiotic linkage of technology and freedom (p. 247, *The Postmodern Scene*).

4. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism, *New Left Review*, No. 146.

5. See *Technology and The Canadian Mind* and *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 11: 1-2 (1984).

6. McLuhan quoted in Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, p. 75.

7. "Environments are not passive wrappings, but active processes which work us over completely, massaging the ratio of the senses and imposing their silent assumptions. But, environments are invisible. Their ground-rules, pervasive structure, and overall pattern elude easy perception." Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, (New York: Bantam, 1967), p. 68.

8. McLuhan quoted in Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, p. 56.

9. See Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, pp. 20-51.

10. For a critique of this position, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "(Re)Watching Television: Notes Toward a Political Criticism," in *Diacritics*, Summer, 1987.

El Norte
Ideology and immigration

by Chris List

Hollywood's images of Latinos consist mostly of abusive and negative stereotypes. [1][open notes in new window] The underlying social issues affecting Latino life in this country are seldom addressed. This lack of representation on the screen is mirrored in the employment patterns of the industry where Latinos make up only about 3% of the work force at major Hollywood studios while comprising more than 9% of the overall population (Ibid., p. 16). Clearly Latinos need access to production as well as representation in film images, for an adequate representation of Latinos to emerge.[2]

Gregory Nava is a young Chicano director who is not backed by a major Hollywood studio.[3] With co-writer and producer Anna Thomas, Nava has challenged the ethnocentric structure of the North American entertainment industry with his independently financed film EL NORTE (1983). This feature-length film deals with topics ignored by Hollywood. It focuses on two young Guatemalan Indians from their flight from their village in Guatemala's highlands to their life of hardship and isolation in Los Angeles, California. The film enjoyed a successful run in art circuit theaters, showed on both cable television's Art and Entertainment Network and PBS, and is available on video cassette. It is a rare example of commercially successful North American Chicano Cinema.[4] For this reason the film merits careful critical examination, especially in terms of its portrayal of Latino life.

Melodrama has always been a significant genre in Latin American cinema. Concerned with a play upon emotions often bordering on pathos, melodrama's protagonists usually suffer incredible adversity, frequently accompanied by the loss of, or rejection by, family and friends. The first sound film produced in Latin America, SANTA (Mexico, 1931), followed this format.[5] Today, melodrama is still perhaps the most popular genre for mass media narratives. Thus in the U.S., Spanish-speaking television networks show a large number of *telenovelas* (produced mainly in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil). These *telenovelas* resemble English language daytime soap operas with the exception that they run for a limited number of episodes (usually 100 to 400). Though most of the *telenovelas* deal with contemporary social issues, some are set in past eras. Also, many of the stories have the topic of class-bred conflict embedded in them — normally in the form of a love story. *Telenovelas* are aired during both daytime and

primetime. Their popularity extends to male as well as female viewers.

EL NORTE fits well within this melodramatic tradition. The central story deals with the young people's immigration. That story also allows concern to be expressed for the disruption of the nuclear family and, by extension, the, loss of mutual aid and cultural identity within the pueblo (translated as both the people and the community). The underlying cause given for the destruction of these positively coded values is an overly simplified class-based explanation played out in the form of stereotyped villains.

Filmmakers and critics of the New Latin American cinema have often challenged the viability of using bourgeois melodramatic form to take on the revolutionary task of undermining regressive ideological assumptions.6 However, many Latin filmmakers still warmly embrace the genre, recognizing the value of its widespread appeal to a broad based audience. Even so, most left filmmakers working with melodrama have also included some sort of rewriting or deconstruction of the form. For instance, instead of a strict linear narrative, LUCÍA (Solas, 1968) uses three melodramas set in different historical periods, with three sets of historically-determined characters. Sergio Giral's THE OTHER FRANCISCO is the story of slavery and the abolitionist movement in Cuba; its form is that of an emotionally-charged melodrama intersected by Brechtian distanciation devices, particularly "corrective" voice-over narration and interviews. By taking a popular narrative form and reworking it, the left cinema in Latin America has successfully combined pleasure with learning.

Should the preoccupations of Latin American left filmmakers also be those of Latino filmmakers in the United States? From what point of view can Latino cinema here be critiqued? In some sense, the mere fact that few Latinos have been able to make films reflecting their experience, indicates the need for caution when mounting any sort of ideological analysis and critique of their films. However, it is a central concern of the Chicano cinema movement that those images which are produced approach an accurate portrayal of the Latino experience and work towards revealing some of the contradictions within daily life that sustain the economic and cultural dominance that North Americans maintain over Latin America.

Futhermore, viewers often generalize from the film's point of view and see it as representing the whole ethnic consciousness of Latino cultural heritage. But Latin American culture within the United States is not homogenous. While Latinos share some of the same cultural history as do Guatemalan refugees, the two groups' identities should not be blurred, especially at this point in time. Cultural misunderstandings can occur between Latinos of diverse nationalities. Contradictory racial, class and sexual orientations come into play. With this in mind, I will venture an analysis of EL NORTE, looking at Nava's treatment of the Guatamalan Indian in particular.

EL NORTE is a melodrama divided into three acts. The first, titled "Arturo Xuncax," is set in an Indian village in Guatemala. The adolescent protagonists of the sequence, Enrique and Rosa, are Arturo's son and daughter. Arturo is a proud Indian who organizes his fellow coffee pickers to fight the plantation's rich landowner. Enrique and Rosa are shown living within the bounds of what the film codes as "Indian" tradition. They obey and respect their parents. They dress in

native costume. They speak both a local dialect and Spanish. Within the confines of their home, they live peacefully and lovingly.

However, the family's security ends when Arturo goes to a clandestine organizing meeting. That night the military, summoned by the plantation overseer, massacres the coffee pickers and behead Arturo. Enrique, hearing gunfire, runs out into the darkness of the village and discovers his father's head hanging from a tree; he kills one of the soldiers from the patrol. The next day the military returns to exterminate all families suspected of rebellion. The mother is taken away. The orphaned fugitives, Enrique and Rosa, must flee "north."

In this first episode, Nava paints a picture of solidarity within the Indian culture, among family members (Enrique and Rosa vow never to separate), among extended family members (Rosa's godmother gives them her life-savings to finance their escape) and among the community of workers (who by meeting that night had sacrificed their lives for the good of the community). These relations set up the viewer to be emotionally manipulated throughout the film, as s/he faces the contradiction between the nobility of the Indian people and the devastation that continuously befalls them. By the end of EL NORTE, Rosa dies of typhus in a Los Angeles hospital bed, leaving Enrique totally alone, facing a future of humiliating day labor and hopelessness. In narrative terms, the plot set up a final irony: Enrique gave up a chance to get a green card in order to stay by his dying sister's bedside. Living by his sense of duty to his family caused his ruin in terms of what the film posits as security and economic success.

The film establishes a close relation between brother and sister, one of true sharing and intense emotion. This relation is foregrounded by the melodramatic style and is often juxtaposed against corrupted relations among Hispanics. Such a contrast is intended to emphasize the strain on social interaction produced by the economics of immigration.

The second episode, called "Coyote," shows Enrique and Rosa trying to cross the border at Tijuana. Coyotes are men who profit from helping people cross, often robbing, raping, or shooting customers as they lead them through the isolated mountain passes. When Enrique and Rosa cross, the coyote attacks them. The fight, however, is interrupted by the U.S. border patrol, who sends the Guatemalans back to Tijuana where the two finally find an honest coyote. But even though the second coyote seems a friend, underlying economic considerations still influence his behavior. When the three arrive in L.A., the coyote sells Enrique and Rosa's labor power to a seedy Chicano middleman, Don Mojte, for seventy-five dollars. Don Mojte, in turn, profits by placing the two in low paying jobs and taking their wages as rent. This structure depicts the economic exploitation of one Hispanic by another, and it stands in sharp contrast to the solidarity within the Indian village.

While such observations reflect social reality, the highly emotional melodramatic structure simply expresses pathos about these strained social relations and loss of tradition. Is it sufficient just to show how the Mexican or Chicano gets his cut?[7] couldn't EL NORTE have offered a deeper analysis of the situation? In what ways would such a narrative change require varying melodrama's linear structure and emphasis on simply good vs. evil?

Nava does play with structure by dividing the film into short self-contained segments, each introduced with intertitles and bracketed by fades. This episodic format works somewhat to distanciate the audience. Nevertheless, it does not really stimulate the viewer to reflect upon the social reality portrayed. Instead, it functions to reduce each segment to the status of a parable or fairytale. It diffuses important relationships set up in each episode as the next one follows. In particular, it prevents the audience from making meaningful causal connections between the situation of oppression in Guatemala and the economic situation of immigrants in the United States.

In terms of the protagonists' development, such a segmented form of the film insinuates that what happened in the first and second episodes — the murder in the village and the escape through Mexico — has become part of their life that is better left in the past. Nava thus shifts our attention from asking why the two were forced into lamentable state, here in the U.S., to a question of how they might obtain the same economic freedom as the white middle class. By the third episode, the past becomes represented by surreal flourishes and exotic images (Rosa hallucinates that her father brings her a basket of flowers with a dead fish in it) which allude emotionally to but do not explain the past as it directly relates to the present. Rather, by flashing back to random, unexplained images supposedly from the past, viewers are encouraged to make overbroad connections and generalizations: e.g., "Indian life is mysterious," or, "Poor people become exploited in both their society and ours by the rich (by implication, exploitation is 'natural')."

The melodrama builds upon a subtext of the *norte* as the promised land. This theme further complicates the viewer's understanding the historical and material relations between what happened in Guatemala and the characters' present life in the U.S. In the first episode, *el norte* seems a land of opportunity, a place where Rosa's godmother always dreamed of going. When Rosa and Enrique finally get to San Diego, we see an aerial shot at night, a magnificent panorama accompanied by a majestic symphony. In the characters' eyes, this shot indicates that the U.S. is a place where their dreams can come true.

Upon their arrival in L.A., the two are willing and proud to do menial labor because they see the opportunity for promotion and advancement, which was not available to them on the coffee plantation. Because of their "work ethic" (what amounts to willingness to knuckle under to white, middle-class supervisors) neither of them goes long without work. Enrique even gets promoted ahead of senior employees after working only a short time. The characters' work ethic impels them to take English classes in which they excel. Finally, Enrique is offered a foreman's job and a chance for a green card. Opportunity clearly awaits him. Thus, the story line establishes that the tragedy is not that he will work at menial labor, but that he must choose to be a laborer instead of a foreman because he will not abandon his sister for the new job (i.e., he clings to his cultural tradition). Eventually, the initial concept of "self respect — set up when Enrique's father spoke of a man needing to work his own land — becomes distorted into another notion: that, in the U.S., Enrique can gain "self-respect" by exchanging his role as exploited laborer for one of greater relative economic power. Ultimately, the film confuses the important sociopolitical concerns of the Guatemalan Indian population (economic self-determination without exploitation, cultural preservation) with capitalist notions of success, never truly challenging oppressive conditions here or in Guatemala.

In the case of EL NORTE, any attempt to understand the causes of exploitation becomes hindered by the use of a stereotyped villain, the U.S. Immigration Service. The Immigration Service's threat overrides any possibility for openly depicting the causal connections between the military threat in Guatemala and Rosa's tragic death from typhus at the end. We see how the two siblings are able to safely cross into Mexico, but when they try to enter the U.S., they must crawl through a rat-infested sewage pipe in order to avoid capture by U.S. authorities. From the rats, Rosa contracts typhus, but she does not seek medical treatment because of fears that she'll be deported.

Within the constraints of the melodrama, this concentration on the lives of the two ghettoized siblings takes on the characteristics of a love story. It saturates us with their love and devotion, with the Immigration Service as the ever-present threat to their love. Thus the story line obscures the initial focus of the tragedy of a family and of a *pueblo* living in constant threat of extermination. EL NORTE shifts to a different social message: we should accept all Latino immigrants because they are warm and loving people and good hard workers. Their countries are too corrupt for them to live in and, besides, they'll suffer any danger or humiliation to get across the border to live in the United States. The threat of deportation is the film's villain. The final implication is that hard-working men like Enrique could indeed succeed within this economic system if a few bad employers could not hold the threat of deportation over their heads.

What begins as a story of two Guatemalan Indians becomes a melodramatic parable of all immigrants who have come from and remain in poverty. Yet, for all the references to poverty, the meaning of poverty within the film remains ambiguous. Early on, for instance, Arturo Xuncax tells his son that in their country, the rich own all the good land and poor work like beasts of burden upon that land. The film assigns the cause of poverty within Guatemala to evil landowners who are never seen. They are an absent threat, yet they are the only subjects the film blames for the people's poverty. By locating the source of oppression in an overly stereotyped notion of the landowner, the film confuses the issue of economic impoverishment of the Third World and especially does not deal with imperialism. Arturo's emotional speeches and those of his children are only broad clichés.[8] The film clings to the melodramatic form and its reductionistic treatment of social issues. Thus, it discourages a more penetrating analysis of prolonged impoverishment in the Third World, especially the implications of U.S. monetary aid and economic investment. Consequently, the film also avoids confronting/ alienating the upper-middle class audiences who populate art house cinemas and subscribe to cable Arts and Entertainment television. It is this audience that (perhaps unknowingly) invests in the companies that lobby the government to keep the Guatemalan army supplied and trained. And it is this same audience that profits from the submissive work force with which impoverished Central America provides them. But poverty is coded in EL NORTE as a state of disgrace that has befallen Central America because of those countries' internal corruption. Salvation for the immigrants can be bestowed by letting them enter the U.S. freely, without threat of deportation. This kind of conflict resolution is sale for U.S. viewers. It allows for our emotional involvement and identification with the impoverished immigrant while never exposing the contradictory position we are enmeshed in as U.S. citizens, when our government and our economic system are largely responsible for Guatemala's condition in the first place. This type of conflict

resolution promotes an attitude of tolerance. Herbert Marcuse has explained how such an attitude, in fact, derives from the very causes of oppression:

"...the conditons of tolerance are loaded: they are determined and defined by the institutional inequality...It is of two kinds: (1) the passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident; and (2) the active, official tolerance granted to the Right as well as the Left, to movements of aggression as well as to movements of peace, to the party of hate as to that of humanity...In doing so it actually protects the already established machinery of discrimination.[9]

By couching the story of the Guatemalan immigrant in the emotional clichés of melodrama, toleration and not confrontation becomes the mode of address the North American viewer is encouraged to adapt. Consequently, the film evokes sympathy, but true understanding and radical alternatives are avoided. Guatemalan and some other Latino viewers, especially refugees, will probably not have the same response that I have described. As Brecht said, the exile is the only true dialectician. The film's clichéd dialogue and stereotyped situations can work as cues to call up lived experience, which itself offers the oppressed a deeper understanding of their situation. For the Guatemalan, the absent landowner and the word poverty are not ambiguous terms. By bringing outside information to the viewing of the film, the exile can supplement the narrative, discard the ideological position of toleration advocated by the text and, in a sense, reread the film as the chronicle of the sufferings of the Central American refugee in general. This would also permit an alternative reading of the last scene of the film — a shot of Enrique doing humiliating day labor followed by a flashback to the head of his father hanging from a tree. According to the film's ideology of toleration, we would interpret this as saying we should allow Enrique to live freely in the U.S. so that he will not have to submit to the barbarity of his own people. But the Guatemalan, taking lived experience as a point of departure, might offer a contradictory reading, interpreting the images as juxtaposing the son's exploitation in the U.S. with the father's in Guatemala, as linking the entire system of oppression to the dominant class' economic and political interests in *both* countries.[10]

I believe that such a reading can only come from an informed viewer. But such informed viewing becomes restricted by conventional modes of distribution and consumption.[11] From a standpoint of making an ideological critique of EL NORTE, those of us working in the Latino community must ask ourselves about the value of this film as an example of Latino cinema. Is an attitude of toleration enough? Should Latino cinema in the U.S. follow in the footsteps of their *compañeros* in Latin America as an alternative cinema? As Latinos in the cities are beginning to grow in political power, now, especially, is the time for filmmakers to broaden their perspective.

NOTES

1. Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Latin Portrayals in Film and Television," *Jump Cut*, No. 30 (March, 1985), p. 14.

2. Distribution and exhibition of subtitled or dubbed foreign productions would also be a significant factor in ensuring adequacy of representation.

3. Of Mexican-American heritage, Nava has identified himself with the concerns of Chicano Cinema in interviews.

4. Since I originally wrote this paper, LA BAMBA, BORN IN EAST LA and STAND AND DELIVER have been financially successful. These films offer a welcomed improvement in the industry's treatment of Latinos yet still represent a relatively small adjustment in the long history of exploitation carried out by an ethnocentric Hollywod system. For a brief overview of the proposed objectives of the Chicano Cinema Movement see Jesus Salvador Trevino, "Form and Technique in Chicano Cinema" as well as other articles in Gary Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema* (Binghamton: Bilingual Review Press, 1985) and Jason C. Johansen, "Notes on Chicano Cinema," JUMP CUT, No. 23 (October, 1980), 9.

5. In SANTA a young girl is forced to leave her family and *pueblo* to work as a prostitute in Mexico City after a military man seduces her. Eventually she dies of cancer, an outcast even from her brothel, because she has been too sick to work.

6. Enrique Colina and Daniel Diaz Torres, "Ideology of Melodrama in the Old Latin American Cinema," *Cine Cubano*, translated and reprinted in *Latin American Filmmakers and the Third Cinema*, Zuzana Pick ed. (Ottawa: Carlton University, 1978).

7. Joel Oseas Perez argues that the characters of the *coyotes* and Don Mojte are too one dimensional and ultimately promote negative stereotypes of Mexicans and Chicanos. See "EL NORTE: Imagenes peryorativas de Mexico y los chicanos," *Chiricu*, 5:1 (1987).

8. For a general analysis of the economic and political situation in Guatemala, see Jonathon Fried, ed., *Guatemala in Rebellion* (NY: Grove Press, 1983).

9. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 84-85. 10. This interpretation ignores another possible ending for the film, one which Nava never confronts. Instead of placing Enrique in a passive, fatalistic role, Nava could have had him return to Guatemala and join the revolutionary forces. For an account of the role of the Indian population in the Guatemalan revolutionary process see *I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984).

11. This point was confirmed in March, 1987 when EL NORTE played on Chicago PBS. It was introduced as a film about Guatemalans who decide to immigrate to the U.S. because of arguments over land currently taking place in that country. This reductionistic explanation of the Guatemalan political situation angered Guatemalan refugee groups who responded with phone calls of protest against the announcer and the station.

Is It Easy To Be Young? The Burgler
No future in Riga or Leningrad

by Brenda Bollag

For the Soviet cinema, the new policy of "openness" being packaged under the name of "Glasnost" has meant first and foremost the opening of the closets where banned films had been stashed and the rehabilitation of the generation of "damned filmmakers" who had directed them. A few of these directors, such as Sergei Paradjanov, Elem Klimov, and Andrei Tarkovsky, had managed to continue making films despite the obstacles continually placed in their paths and to remain the objects of considerable international acclaim despite fierce official opposition.

Others, such as Alexander Askoldov (director of KOMISAR/ THE COMMISSAR, 1967-87)[1] and Kira Muratova (director of KOROTKIE VSTRECI/ BRIEF ENCOUNTERS, 1967-87 and DOLGIE PROVODY/ THE LONG FAREWELL, 1971-87), were more efficiently banished from the studios and screens, remaining almost entirely unknown until two years ago. The Soviet cinema's belated coming-out party has been greeted in the West by an enthusiastic critical response and by the attribution of a number of important prizes in the major festivals: the Golden Bear, first prize of the Berlin Film Festival was awarded to Gleb Panfilov's TEMA (THE THEME, 1979) in 1987, the *Prix spécial du jury* of the 1987 Cannes Film Festival was awarded to Tengiz Abuladze's POKAJANIE (REPENTANCE, 1984), and Askoldov's THE COMMISSAR would win a Silver Bear in Berlin in 1988.

Now the works of a new generation of Soviet filmmakers are beginning to appear on the screen. Filmmakers like Yuris Podnieks and Valery Ogorodnikov, babies when Stalin died in 1953, were still children at the time that the Khruschev thaw was allowing their predecessors to make their promising debuts. They had the good fortune to come of age as filmmakers just as the Glasnost era was beginning. In their provocative first feature-length works, Podnieks and Ogorodnikov bring the problems of alienated Soviet youth to the screen in ways which scarcely would have seemed imaginable three years ago.

Podnieks' remarkably successful documentary VAI VIEGLI BUT JAUNAM? (IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG? 1986) was produced by Rigafilm, national studio of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia (population: 2,600,000). Annexed by the Soviet Union during WWII along with Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia in particular and the Baltic states in general have long been recognized for their relatively high standard of living (markedly superior to that of Russia and the other Soviet Republics), for

the forcefulness with which they defend their independent national identities, for their tendency to resist the Moscow regime, and for the extraordinary richness of their traditions in documentary cinematography.

Over 20 million Soviet spectators have seen IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG? Today many see it as the Glasnost film *par excellence*, as the work which incarnates more clearly than any other the spirit of the Gorbachov era. But when Podnieks began working on it in 1984, Chernenko was still in power and the age of Glasnost was still two years off. Predictably, the film encountered various types of opposition at various stages of its realization. When in 1986 Podnicks was told that the film could not be shown because it did not portray "typical" Soviet youth, he invited Politburo member Igor Ligatchev to a private screening. Ligatchev liked it and ordered its immediate release for screening in movie theaters throughout the country. Only after its favorable reception in Russia in a Russian dubbed version was the film finally authorized for projection in Latvia in its original Latvian version.

The film begins with scenes of an open-air rock concert held in the suburbs of Riga in the summer of 1985. On the train ride back to the city, excited young fans pillaged two railway cars, causing extensive damage. In violation of one of the Western media's strongest remaining taboos, Podnieks was allowed to film the ensuing trial of seven youths. In a scene which is nearly unbearable to watch, the judges announce the verdict: six of the defendants are fined and put on parole, while the seventh -- the only one to have pleaded innocent -- is given three years at hard labor. As the sentence is read, he turns towards his comrades and asks, "Is it me they're talking about?" He struggles momentarily to compose himself, and then breaks down as he realizes what is happening to him.

In another hard-hitting sequence, a young woman who attempted to commit suicide by throwing herself out of a window, but who involuntarily saved herself by grabbing onto a pole, is interrogated by a frighteningly callous board of examiners in a psychiatric hospital. Drug abuse, the threat of nuclear contamination, the cult of the Hare Krishnas, as well as general feelings of uselessness and despair are among the other problems which Podnieks explores with the same unrelenting directness, foregoing the use of a didactic voice-off commentary in order to let young people themselves address us. The difficult readjustment of veterans of the war in Afghanistan is another prominent theme. "I wanted to know what it means" says Podnieks "for a young person to acquire his vision of the world in a place like Afghanistan." One young veteran, decorated for his bravery on the battlefield, explains why he hides his medal: "I just can't get away from the idea that what we did there was dirty and inhuman."

Yet, despite its powerful immediacy and authenticity, IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG? makes no claim to being an "objective" reflection of unadulterated reality. Rather, Podnicks openly admits to his role as deliberate manipulator of sounds and images, assuming a clear authorial stance not through the use of voice-over narration, but through the unabashedly stylized use of techniques normally associated with fiction film. The above-mentioned courtroom sequence, for example, is fragmented, intercut with other footage, and reconstructed by means of parallel montage to the rhythm of Martins Brauns' funky, upbeat musical score.

Like Podnieks, Ogorodnikov has a strong background in documentary filmmaking. In VZLOMSCIK (THE BURGLAR, 1987), however, he attempts to apply a number

of its techniques and principles to the making of what is essentially a fiction film. Winner of the *Settimana della Critica*'s FIPRESCI Prize at the 1987 Venice Film Festival, THE BURGLAR is a compelling portrait of the subculture of young rockers in Leningrad. In it, Ogorodnikov freely juxtaposes actors, non-actors, and rock musicians playing their own roles into a highly eclectic pastiche within which the borderline between the staged and the spontaneous is particularly hard to identify.

Although the film follows a fairly straightforward narrative line built around the characters of 13-year old Senka Lauskin (Oleg Elykomov) and his older brother Kostia (played by Konstantin Kincev, star of the Leningrad rock group "Alisa"), standard plot development is largely subordinated to the use of directly recorded fragments of unrehearsed reality. Here, like in IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG?, as well as in Vadim Abdrasitov's PLUMBUM (1986), Sergei Soloviev's ASSA (1987), Aleko Tzabadze's PIATNO (THE STAIN, Georgian SSR, 1987), and in Sergei Bodrov's excellent NEPROFESSIONALI (THE AMATEURS, Kazakh SSR, 1984-87), rock music appears as a major thematic leitmotiv. Refusing the facile symbolism of a one-to-one equation between rock music and youthful rebellion, Ogorodnikov assembles everything from Strauss waltzes to tangos into a surprising musical collage, which underscores the clash of life styles and value systems among the film's characters.

Towards the end of the film, Senka is caught stealing an electric organ from the Palace of Culture. Deciding against the easily (melo)dramatic effect of a heavy prison sentence, Ogorodnikov opts to have Senka get off with a stiff reprimand. But although it ends with Senka's release, THE BURGLAR can in no way be considered a film with a happy ending. For the moment, Senka and Kostia are not in prison. But the acute feelings of aimlessness and of having no future which they share with their real-life counterparts in IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG? will inevitably continue to fester.

The filmmakers of the "damned generation" are busily settling accounts with the past both through the release of shelved films made many years ago and also through treating heretofore untouchable episodes of Soviet history [cf. in particular Marina Babak's BOLSE SVETA (MORE LIGHT! 1987) and Abuladze's REPENTANCE]. Meanwhile, the first generation of Soviet filmmakers with no first-hand personal experience of the Stalin era clearly has its own problems to worry about. With the cynical lucidity of those who realize that they have been lied to about their own history, Podnieks and Ogorodnikov blithely transgress both thematic taboos and the traditionally rigid barrier separating documentary from fiction film. Thanks to their talent, their inventiveness, and their genuine concern for their young subjects, both filmmakers succeed in reconciling their commitment to the truthful and undistorted representation of reality with the desire to express an emphatically subjective -- and resolutely free-spirited -- point of view.

NOTES

1. When two dates are given with reference to a single film title, the former is the date of its realization and the latter the date of its release for distribution.

Introduction
The fictions of documentary

by Julia Lesage

Documentary film and videomakers understand that the way they manipulate images and sounds, as well as how they choose their subject matter, makes fiction and documentary genres merge. Some topics and speakers seem more "dramatic," "moving," or "memorable," and thus get chosen for a documentary portrayal. We may say, in this sense, that all documentaries are fiction. However, such a statement needs expansion to explain how documentaries do and could work, especially in the United States at this time.

This special section is organized from an examination of the existential conditions underlying documentary production and reception to an analysis of the fictions inherent in television news. In "Engagement and the Documentary," Anne Fischel offers a reflection on her own diverse documentary filmmaking practice and a theoretical analysis about the ways that the film/videomaker's personal and political engagement with the subject matter and the people filmed enhances, indeed, makes possible, in-depth documentary portrayals.

Discussing another, more experimental, filmmaking strategy, Cohn Chambers and John Hess describe the lyrical vision of Dutch filmmaker Johan van der Keuken, whose images and sounds draw upon a meditation on daily life and the environment and whose montage is often structured connotatively to make a political point.

In "Hurting Women," Loretta Campbell discusses three documentaries made specifically to combat the abuse of women. INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE; SUZANNE, SUZANNE; and TO LOVE, HONOR, AND OBEY, all distributed by Third World Newsreel, show the specific oppression of women, as it exists on an institutional level in the prison system, and as it exists on an intimate personal level, in the family. These films deal with women's oppression in the United States across racial lines, and they optimally would have a role to play in many kinds of political organizing situations. The films prove Anne Fischel's theoretical argument about engagement as an effective approach to media making. Viewed together, they also offer an opportunity to reflect on why they have drawn primarily an audience of women. The issue of "engagement," especially in terms of documentaries that depict women's oppression, can be applied to audiences as well.

In "Inventing and Preserving Appalachia," Jane Gaines analyzes two major ways that regional or folklore documentaries are limited by previous ideological constraints. She takes up the case of Appalachia to demonstrate how conceptual structures shape social discourse about a region; often the discourse that defines a region as a region has come not from the people living there, but from academics and promoters of development and tourism. Second, documentary forms also bear an ideological weight, especially the cinema verité form. Gaines analyzes these theoretical issues, applicable to folklore documentary media in general, as she looks at the history of the Appalshop media group and a number of their films.

Filmmaker and novelist, Owen Shapiro and Thomas Friedman, have discovered another constraint on expressing a theme with which they are personally engaged. They have discovered that there is a cultural "meta-theme" surrounding the Holocaust which dictates that not only certain issues but also certain images and cinematic forms be used to treat Hitler's extermination of the Jews. In "Their Holocaust upon Watching Ours," the filmmakers reflect on their own cinematic practice and the confused reception of their works. Shapiro and Friedman discuss the difficulty of finding an apt way to express the knowledge and experience of the children of Holocaust survivors, especially since parents have often refused to discuss their own traumas and real memories of the past.

Finally, two essays describe the ways that the news is a fiction. Tijani El-Miskin discusses a TV docudrama filmed like a news broadcast and compares it to H.G.Wells' socially disruptive radio program, WAR OF THE WORLDS. This NBC docudrama, SPECIAL BULLETIN, depicted a nuclear explosion (set off by anti-nuclear activists!) in Charleston and looked on television very much like the evening news. Reversing the situation, examining news that is supposed to look like fact, Mariko Tomita and Carl Bybee offer a theoretical framework in which to understand the ways that industrial and ideological constraints shape the news so that the "facts" presented there have often less explanatory value that do images and situations in media which is more obviously fiction.

Engagement and the documentary

by Anne Fischel

Documentary films are problematic. They purport to provide information about events, institutions and cultures. They organize that information, integrating and synthesizing it into a coherent picture of the world.

Documentaries awaken a desire not just for information but for insight, understanding, and intimacy. We want the camera to take us some place we haven't been and show us something we haven't seen, and we want it to do so in a way which "gives" us the experience. Seeing films about the !Kung Bushmen, the Loud family, or the inside of a juvenile court seems as good as being there; perhaps better, because it enables us to skip the complex and difficult processes of coming to know, and go straight to the vicarious ownership which film knowledge confers.

Yet, as anyone who has developed expertise in some subject, traveled to a foreign country, or moved into a strange neighborhood knows, we do not acquire knowledge so easily. We may gather information rapidly or slowly, but mastering the levels of a coherent social reality is a complex matter, requiring many initiations and much testing, much stumbling and confusion, and, above all, changes in the person who seeks to know.

Much of the critical attention directed at the documentary has looked at the completed work as a text, attempting to reveal both its artistry (its constructed nature) and its interpretive bias (its point of view). I intend to take a somewhat different tack, by looking at the approaches which filmmakers take to filming, the relations and commitments which their choices reflect, and the kinds of knowledge which those relations produce.

Let me first identify my own dispositions. I am committed to the continued development of a documentary practice. I believe that documentary films provide one of the most powerful means we have to represent communities to one another and to address social issues and problems. Precisely for this reason, filmmakers continually need to interrogate their own practices, evaluating the appropriateness and integrity of their methods, and the effectiveness and fidelity of the films those methods produce.

To concretize this discussion I will draw upon some of my own experiences as a documentary filmmaker. In 1976 I made a film called MISA COLOMBIANA in a *tugurio*, or shantytown, in Medellin, Colombia. The people in the community were

unemployed urban migrants, squatting on municipal land, and struggling to find a footing for themselves in the city. They lived in terrible poverty, without adequate food or clothing, and without running water, schools, or health services. Nothing could have been more alien to my own experience.

Six years later, in 1982, while I was living in Boston, I made a film about eating disorders, called I DONT HAVE TO HIDE. I had been anorexic and I received funding for the film in part because the supporting agency knew my personal history, and believed I was uniquely qualified to treat the issues. I chose the topics and events depicted in I DON'T HAVE TO HIDE after discussions with women who were or had been anorexic or bulemic. I also appeared in the film, identifying myself both as the filmmaker and as a woman who had struggled with anorexia.

My earliest experiences in filmmaking took place with ethnographic filmmakers. Although the focus of my work has shifted, I tend to define personal realities as cultural systems, with their own sets of meanings, rules, and folkways. In this essay I will use "culture' in this loosely ethnographic sense, to describe any coherent social system which a filmmaker might seek to document.

FILM AS KNOWLEDGE

It is more than forty years since John Grierson sought some identifying concepts for the documentary film. Grierson wrote of the importance of using natural material, and filmic situations based on actual environments and events. But he also noted that the array of films which could be labeled "documentary" with such minimal criteria was so large as to make the category almost meaningless. For Grierson the distinction between the documentary and its precursor, the film travelogue, lies in the depth of understanding which is achieved by the filmmaker and revealed in the film. The documentary, in Grierson's words, "must master its material on the spot, and come in intimacy to ordering it."[1][open notes in new window] The documentary does not simply describe or observe, nor does it play on the surface values of situations. Grierson wrote,

> "You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it." (pp. 102-103)

From a contemporary perspective Grierson's formulation appears romantic and incomplete. Yet it remains pertinent. The authority and responsibility of the filmmaker stem from this ability to represent reality through the medium of images s/he creates and structures. Grierson evokes a central issue of documentary: the ambiguity surrounding the film's relation to the reality it purports to represent.

Furthermore, most documentaries do not make that relation explicit. Whatever the method, whatever the process by which filmmakers come to know what they know, they do not generally communicate that part of the story to the viewer.

Traditionally, documentary conventions have discouraged including reflexive accounts in the film itself. The process by which an analysis and a narrative are developed is systematically excluded. Instead, the films frequently offer images that project an unqualified certainty and confidence about the worlds they portray, suppressing any acknowledgement that reality is more ambiguous and complex.

This problem is not unique to the documentary film. In a sense documentaries share many of the problems of data-based research. Only recently, for instance, have social scientists begun to acknowledge the role of the knower in shaping the content of what is known. And only recently have ethnographic studies begun to look at what researchers actually do when they are doing their work.

Like films, the accounts of research which are published in journals and disseminated in classrooms are written to exclude the subjective aspects of knowledge gathering. In the words of Sir Peter Medawar:

> "scientific papers are not meant to be records of the method of discovery, but rather a posteriori structures imposed upon the discovery to eliminate in the product as much subjectivity as possible.[2]

But scientific papers and documentary films serve a constitutive, as well as a descriptive, function. They help to construct the social reality of inquiry which, in turn, sets the guidelines for further work. When filmmakers do not integrate their intense subjective involvement in some formal way into the film, then the process of discovery is misrepresented and routinized. Such films communicate a distorted view of what knowledge is and how it is attained.

I am not suggesting that all documentary films should make their methodologies public, and I am certainly not arguing that documentary forms should be standardized. But I am suggesting that we need to confront the relation to knowledge which documentaries claim, and which audiences appear to expect.

Subjectivity, as Medawar writes of it, does not only mean bias, error, or chance. What I take him to mean by subjectivity is the engagement of the knower, that complex mixture of investment, absorption, curiosity, and desire that figures in the search for knowledge.

Seeing and knowing are political acts. In any filmic situation the filmmaker confronts a range of experiences from the very public to the very private. Sometimes situations reveal themselves readily; at other times, access must be negotiated in stages. Often the determining factor is the quality of relations between filmmaker and subjects, the extent to which people can feel a common sense of purpose, and can trust that they will be heard and understood.

In this context understanding means grasping the terms by which a community makes sense of its experience. But understanding also refers to the filmmaker's personal stance and to his/her willingness to be engaged, suspend preconceptions and judgments, and struggle honestly with differences.

THE FILMMAKER AS STRANGER

Traditionally, documentary's starting place has been the filmmaker's desire to know a subject or a way of life with which s/he is unfamiliar. Whether it is Flaherty filming the Inuit, Fred Wiseman a department store, or Ricky Leacock a fundamentalist community, the documentary filmmaker is defined as an outsider, a stranger seeking entry to someone else's world.

Generally we assume that strangeness is a temporal — and temporary — condition.

Someone we meet for the first time is a stranger, but in time s/he becomes familiar, and the condition of strangeness dissolves. Strangeness can be overcome by proximity, contact, or education. It is not in any sense a sociological, or existential, condition.

Another conception of strangeness more accurately describes the relation between documentarians and their subjects. In 1908 Georg Simmel, the German sociologist and philosopher, defined strangeness as an essential condition of certain social relations. "The stranger," wrote Simmel, is not

> "the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather...the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going.[3]

Simmel's definition of the stranger roots us in an ancient historical relation. The Old Testament constructs special rules of hospitality and interaction for strangers, who are not simply wanderers passing through, but persons whose ethnic or religious origins lie elsewhere. Simmel says that strangers are, by definition, not the owners of the soil, but the ones who import new qualities into the group, qualities "which do not and cannot stem from the group itself" (p. 402).

Strangers possess mobility, "that synthesis of nearness and distance which constitutes the formal position of the stranger" (pp. 403-04). The mobile person has contact with many members of the group, but is "not organically connected, through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation, with any single one" (p. 404).

Because strangers are not committed to the perspectives and norms of the group, the strangers are free to view them "objectively." Objectivity, for Simmel is not a passive or neutral stance, but "a particular structure, composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement" (p. 404) Simmel describes the freedom needed to formulate a point of view which does not arise within the context of the social system it observes.

Strangers frequently become repositories of confidences. They get told things, or shown things, which are withheld from other members of the group. I have often been amazed at the apparent ease, even urgency, with which people would share their personal histories with me. Telling one's story to a stranger places it in another context, and therefore confers importance upon it. The perspective of the stranger offers another situation from which to view one's own life and give it shape and coherence, taking it beyond the level of daily episodes to another configuration of meaning.

Strangeness, then, is a form of relationship, characterized by freedom on the one hand and obligation on the other. The stranger's mobility allows an independence and psychic distance which members of the culture do not possess. Yet the role of the stranger is essentially one which can only be enacted in social contexts. It has no meaning except within a network of personal relations. Social and psychic distance do not diminish the intensity of the relations between strangers and group members, or between documentary filmmakers and their subjects. Rather, distance becomes a context, structuring forms of intimacy which can only take place

between people with different cultural perspectives. What are some of the obligations conferred by relations between strangers?

In an essay entitled "Faithfulness and Gratitude," Simmel writes that all social relations are supported by the quality of faithfulness. Faithfulness is the state in which persons affirm, not their feeling for each other, but their commitment to the relationship they have established. Faithfulness is "the instrument of relationships which already exist and endure."[4] It is one of the means by which a social community preserves itself. Moreover, faithfulness

> "more than other feelings is accessible to our moral intentions. Other feelings overcome us, like sunshine or rain, and their coming and going cannot be controlled by our will." (pp. 384-85)

Unlike other emotions, faithfulness is something we choose and enact, in order to complete our connections to other people. It is a political and ethical mandate which underlies the emotional content of relationships, even when they are experienced as problematic. The presence of faithfulness in relationships between filmmakers and their subjects is therefore a matter of choice, not circumstance. Its presence or absence affects how films are made, what they say, and how they say it.

Finally, strangers are not blank slates. The stranger's freedom is comparative, not absolute, for strangers bring with them their own contexts for perceiving and experiencing. The relationships between strangers and group members may be thought of as systems which incorporate and rework the features of each culture. Strangers are created by their social context, but they also bring new elements into the culture which may change the awareness of its members, and, in some cases, its historical and structural features as well.

DOCUMENTARY STRATEGIES

Simmel's discussion of the stranger can help us understand the problems which documentary filmmakers confront, and the strategies they develop to solve them.

In making documentaries, filmmakers must observe events and make sense out of them. They move from observation — gathering information or data — to description, formulating a coherent narrative structure to convey what they have observed. Different strategies can be used to get from one stage of the process to the other. How these strategies are chosen and implemented depends upon the filmmaker's priorities and point of view.

One of the most common strategies involves developing, or adopting, a conceptual schema through which observations can be filtered. Methods of observation and inference are decided upon in advance and imported into the situation. Ethnographic filmmakers often proceed in this way. They bring to their fieldwork methods and analytic techniques which they have developed in previous field situations.

Etic approaches are enormously helpful to documentarians.[5] They may abbreviate, or eliminate entirely, the ambiguity and confusion which characterize initial stages of contact. They enable filmmakers to orient themselves and proceed purposefully in alien surroundings. Finally, they create classifying systems which

can be applied in different situations, and used as the basis for cultural comparisons. In this sense, filmmakers have tended to recreate the values of traditional science, which seeks to interpret different events and contexts according to its own stable schemas of order.

Etic systems also carry certain constraints. They structure the filmmaker's relationships with people, defining them in advance as informants and systematizing the range of interactions which can take place. They can be both circular, and causal; the filmmaker who sets out to look for given phenomena will probably find them and will probably assume they are central aspects of the community s/he is looking at. Preconceptualized systems may also prevent filmmakers from discovering what community members believe to be important, and may bias the kinds of confidences which they are likely to receive. If people know what you want, they will probably try to give it to you. They will not court your rejection by offering something in which they think you have no interest.

Perhaps the most important point is that the filmmakers' primary relationships are not with their subjects at all, but with the aesthetic and intellectual paradigms they endorse. They are committed to a pattern of thinking which they import into the situation and impose upon it. The pattern will certainly yield some insights about the situation but it tells us much more about the filmmakers whose beliefs shaped the structure of discovery which is communicated in the film.

The second strategy documentarians commonly use is to approach their subject matter through a series of procedures based upon conventional visual styles and forms. We are all familiar with distortions of this method, most notably in television, where the standard television documentary provides a method of packaging, rather than a structure of disclosure. In less extreme situations, the filmmaker's vocabulary of visual forms and conventions serves the same purpose as the ethnographer's conceptual structure. It is not a neutral apparatus of perception, but an enabling grid through which experience is filtered.

The continuity of style exhibited by many documentaries is perhaps the clearest proof that filmmakers actually do proceed this way. Both the openly rhetorical style of Pare Lorentz and the observational style of Fred Wiseman display an approach which tends to remain stable over time, developing its motifs, and extending and clarifying its structural devices, but always remaining consistent with its own formal base. The filmmakers may be interested in their subjects and committed to portray what they learn from them honestly and without distortion. Nevertheless they are choosing to do so through the medium of a prior commitment to a set of formal concerns which structure what they observe and how they describe it.

I am not asserting that we can come to intercultural encounters purified of our own particularity, our own cultural and ideological givens. But the documentary enterprise provides, even requires, moments in which those givens can become the focus of scrutiny, and of struggle. Mobility confers the ability to reflect upon one's own culture, as well as upon the community one is filming. If each of us interprets reality through the medium of our own experience, then it is not only useful but imperative that we develop awareness of the cultural implications of our stances.

Without such awareness, knowledge becomes a subtle contest between different versions of reality. In such contests filmmakers are privileged. Their exclusive

possession of technical equipment and media access guarantees them a power of definition which most communities do not possess.

INTEREST, OBLIGATION AND DISCOURSE

Conceiving of strangeness as a positive and defining relationship between persons may help us resolve issues of ethical obligation between filmmakers and subjects. What responsibilities do filmmakers incur? Are considerations of fairness and legality sufficient to guarantee the wellbeing of the persons who are filmed? To what extent must filmmakers honor their subjects' world views, self-presentations, and disclosures?

The relationships between filmmakers and subjects have raised a set of political issues ranging from intrusion, invasion of privacy, and false representation, to domination and colonial penetration. The sad truth is that we have very few criteria by which to evaluate the political validity of documentary acts. Most of the criteria we possess are legalistic and tend to define the rights of filmmakers and subjects as dichotomous or competing. The filmmaker seeks access; the subject needs protection — against exposure or distortion or cultural appropriation. The rights of the one can apparently be safeguarded only by limiting the needs of the other.

This dichotomy makes sense only if we assume that the relationship between filmmaker and subject is essentially instrumental. What is really at issue here is not the presence or absence of legal safeguards, but the fact that filmmakers are not disinterested. All too often they perceive contacts with subjects as a set of tasks to accomplish in order to make a film. No wonder aboriginal peoples have so often experienced picture-taking as a violation of their personhood! No wonder that peoples of all cultures and levels of technological sophistication regard the camera with such cynicism.

 I made MISA COLOMBIANA in 1976. It was a time of great political optimism in the *tugurio*. Radical priests, members of a group called the Golconda, had organized the *tugurianos*, creating a sense of collective identity and community pride. The people had elected a governing board, and were meeting to discuss community issues. They had drawn up a map, indicating where homes could be built and streets should be cleared. Neighbors were helping each other construct permanent dwellings, with bricks made from the sand they had hauled from the riverbank. They had also formed a cooperative to market the paper, glass, and metal which many of them scavenged from the municipal dump.

The *Tugurianos* were proud of themselves and their accomplishments. They welcomed me into their community and helped me build a shack like theirs in which to live. They placed no restrictions upon my movements. Their only stipulation was that I live among them and participate in their daily activities. They believed that this would provide me with the knowledge and awareness I needed to represent their interests. For the *Tugurianos* a film which documented the conditions of their lives was, by definition, a form of advocacy. They perceived my work as a demonstration of political commitment. In response, they created a learning experience for me which catapulted me into empathy and identification with them.

The *Tugurianos* had little experience with film, or filmmaking. When I made I

DONT HAVE TO HIDE I was faced with a very different constituency. The anorexics and bulemics with whom I worked were vulnerable, highly sophisticated, ambivalent about public exposure, and wary of being exploited. Like the *Tugurianos*, they needed to feel close to me, and to trust that I would represent them fairly. In this case, however, the relationship between us was not based on political sympathy, but on a common experience. The women confided in me because they knew I had been anorexic. My ability to make the film depended not just on what I could learn but on my willingness to acknowledge my own membership in the community.

I came to understand that my identity as filmmaker and knower conferred certain privileges. It offered a safety which I found difficult to relinquish. Living in the Colombian *tugurio* had been challenging. It was even more demanding and intimidating to identify anorexia as my own experience and to take responsibility for it, explicitly and visibly, in the film.

I am not trying to set myself up as an exemplar, but only to illustrate the multiplicity and complexity of the problems which filmmakers confront, and the necessity, which remains constant across situations, to let faithfulness create the context in which both understanding and filming can take place. Admittedly, this means giving up the comfort of certainties. Initially there may be no way to make sense of experience, to know what things mean, what is important, or how to act. There is also the risk — terrifying to all filmmakers — that no "story," no organized and coherent narrative, will emerge. The overwhelming temptation is to cut off the threat of chaos at its root and begin to structure the experience in terms of known conventions and categories.

Yet chaos in certain contexts can be a form of freedom. Michel Foucault teaches us that all systems of order are inherently legitimating. They exclude as much as they purport to explain. Thus, certainty represents the hardening of insight into ideology. What filmmakers — and, I would maintain, all researchers — need, are systems whose theories and methods support risk-taking by legitimating freedom from certainty, and contextualizing it as a viable approach to knowledge.

The knowledge gained through engaged and committed relationships with strangers is intrinsically like a dialogue. We must do more than observe, interpret, and validate our conclusions. Dialogic knowledge is achieved through interaction and negotiation. In this process all participants are active, and have a say in the decisions which produce formalized versions of their experience.

Jurgen Habermas has referred to this process as discourse, an activity which establishes the basis of communicative relationships. Discourse must guarantee openness of inquiry. Each participant must be free to introduce arguments and to counter those of the other. Discourse must offer each participant an equal opportunity for speech and for self-disclosure. And it must establish an equal distribution of power among the participants. In Habermas' model, discourse unites the personal and political dimensions of relationships in a process designed to facilitate the undistorted communication of experience.[6]

Habermas' model is admittedly a utopian one. But it points us toward a very different level of engagement than that required by observation. Discourse mandates that each party be open to the needs and interests of the other. The

filmmaker must be flexible and vulnerable; she/he must be willing to be seen as well as to see. In some cases it requires sharing ownership of the film. In TWO LAWS, the film which Caroline Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini made with Australia's Borroloola Aboriginal community, and in Martine Barrat's videotapes of South Bronx gangs, subjects collaborated in the filmmaking process. Such collaborations not only influence the thematic content of the films, they generate stylistic and structural innovations as well.

Perhaps the most important task of the documentary film is to explore the ethical and ideological issues which link experience, knowledge, and representation. The documentary process challenges us to ask more questions, to probe our assumptions about film, culture and ourselves, and to experiment with new cinematic forms in which the issues we discover can be more fully addressed.

NOTES

1. John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsythe Hardy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1947), p. 102.

2. Cited in Robert Scott Root-Bernstein, "Creative Process as a Unifying Theme of Human Cultures," *Daedalus* 113 No. 3 (Summer 1984), p. 207.

3. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), p. 402.

4. Georg Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 379.

5. The terms "etic" and "emic" are derived from phonology. An etic alphabet is a standardized symbol system for representing sounds in any language. An emic approach seeks to discover the significant sounds in a language as they appear to native speakers. Etic researchers bring their analytical constructs to the field situation and use them to observe and interpret the phenomena they are studying.

6. An excellent discussion of Habermas' model of discourse and the ideal speech community can be found in Brant R. Burleson, and Susan L. Kline, "Habermas' Theory of Communication: A Critical Explication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979), pp. 412-428.

Distributors:

- MISA COLOMBIANA, Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse St., Watertown, MA, 02172. (617) 926-0491.
- I DON'T HAVE TO HIDE, Fanishr Productions, 47 Halifax St., Boston, MA, 02130. (617) 524-0980.
- THANKSGIVING DAY, from the filmmaker, Anne Fischel, 127 Mr. Warner Rd., Hadley, MA, 01035.

Johan van der Keuken: political and experimental

by Cohn Chambers

In 1980 Amsterdam's main municipal Stede Lijk museum mounted a major exhibition of Johan van der Keuken's work: films, photographs and texts. This is quite an achievement for an independent, leftwing filmmaker who is too experimental and formalist for many political people and too politically pointed for many followers of the avant-garde. Influenced by Dutch realist photographers and filmmakers such as Joris Ivens, by existential and Eastern philosophies, by abstract painting and jazz, van der Keuken has developed a unique, memorable style, combining political and avant-garde filmmaking traditions and joining subjective expression and objective explanation.

Revealing his origins in photography, van der Keuken creates striking still images, which he then juxtaposes with other images to build up a context or to expose contradictions. He uses as a major theme in his work the growing and glaring disparity between the rich and developed yet alienated North (especially Holland and the USA) and the poor, "underdeveloped," oppressed, yet hopeful South. A major subordinate theme deals with artists' struggles and art's power. Clearly van der Keuken believes that art plays an important role in personal and social development and can intervene to change society. He learned to take photographs at age twelve, taught by a leftwing grandfather whom he recalls in FILMMAKER'S HOLIDAY(1974).

Born in Amsterdam in 1938, van der Keuken has become well-known in Holland compared to other independent filmmakers. His reputation has spread across Europe, especially to France. Yet, although his films are subtitled in English, his work goes virtually unknown in Britain and the USA. In Holland, state-funded cultural organizations and political groups (no parties) have commissioned him to make films. A liberal Dutch television channel, VPRO, has funded and broadcast most of van der Keuken's films. Subsequently they have been seen on the radical cinema circuit. Interest in van der Keuken has grown beyond the young cultural intelligentsia; several articles about him and interviews have appeared in large circulation papers as well as in left journals.

His mother was a primary school teacher, and his father became head of a secondary shool, leaving their working-class background for a more middle-class

milieu. While still at school, van der Keuken published a book of photographs depicting his contemporaries and soon after that two more books of photos. He studied filmmaking in Paris from 1956-58 and with two friends, James Blue and Denny Hal, made his first film there. Before devoting himself full-time to making films, van der Keuken wrote film reviews for a Dutch paper while his photographs were exhibited in European cities.

Many of van der Keuken's films have a music score by the leading Dutch jazz saxophonist Willem Breuker. Van der Keuken has also made two films about jazz musicians: MAARTEN AND THE DOUBLE BASS (1977) and a personal film about the saxophonist Ben Webster who was living in Amsterdam when the film was shot. Like A FILM FOR LUCEBERT (1962), which was made for the Ministry of Culture about a Dutch painter-poet, BIG BEN (1967) is not a conventional portrait but an exploration. It is made up of biographical details, scenes of everyday life, and the joy and exuberance of the music contrasted to the violence of the world in which the black artist lives and takes his stand. We see Ben Webster in his surroundings — relaxing on a train, traveling on tour, visiting the zoo, talking to his landlady, and playing pool in a smoky bar.

The camera picks up and holds objects that might be excluded from a traditional television documentary, like the vase in the window of Ben's rented room. Yet this is not cinema verité. Any illusion of objectivity or any kind of "psychological" approach becomes shattered by the editing and cinematic rhythm. Until the end, we never see Webster play a number all the way through. The camera always interrupts him and cuts him short, until the end when it seems that the film no longer can contain him. The images constantly stress his size, his proportions, his physical presence, and the energy he uses to move and play. We seem to witness a struggle between the filmmaker and the musician. The filmmaker returns again and again to the ordinary aspects of life — smoking, taking a drink, swearing, being dignified or violent (suggested in the haunting zoo sequence by close ups of ferocious animal faces). The musician is always trying to do what he does best — play jazz. While the filmmaker undermines the "living legend" profile, the musician wins out. Finally we hear the tremendous sweet and powerful sounds given full rein. Van der Keuken's celebration is complete. The jigsaw puzzle is finished.

Van der Keuken's films are rigorously constructed artistic forms. When analyzed, they seem abstract. Van der Keuken always seeks to integrate his perception and artistic expression. This often produces odd and idiosyncratic films but ones that nevertheless add up to make telling statements about their subjects.

Take, for example, one sequence in THE NEW ICE AGE (1974), the last film of the Triptych "North-South," which deals with relations between rich, industrialized northern Europe and the third world it has underdeveloped. In that sequence, the camera takes the viewer into Lima, Peru. The overall sensation is of visual and aural hub-bub. Loud, raucous traffic noises mixed with the sonorous sax of Breaker dominate the images on the screen: the mountains, the road, the traffic, the town, the primary colors of the huge advertisements promoting Marxism, Coca Cola, and Inca Cola. These images seem to fight the sound for a place on the screen. An impression of spatial depth is heightened when the sound becomes less intense and the image track uses more close-ups. According to van der Keuken, a hole is created when the sound "retreats," and the image can come across this hole toward

the spectators.

The formal arrangement of shots against the retreating sound reproduces the effect of two cultures meeting. The traveler, at first confused and overwhelmed by noise, gets nearer and can make some order out of the mass of new sensations. The picture becomes clearer as the older culture takes over and asserts itself. The musical score draws on traditional indigenous music, connoting respect for the older culture, but it never loses the hybrid quality that characterizes Lima today, a city with its own proud, indigenous past whose present has been shaped by a foreign culture imposed on that past. At that time, out of that mix, and influenced by socialist ideas, Peru was trying to create a new future. At the time of filming in early 1974, there was still hope for improvement from a military government that claimed to be leftwing. (Things started to deteriorate in 1975).

Van der Keuken uses the notion that all a film's formal elements are autonomous yet come alive only in relation to each other. He tries to remind viewers that they are watching a film and also that the film is connected to their social reality. He mostly uses images drawn from non-fictional reality, ones that are documentary-based.

He uses kaleidoscopic montages to show reality in a new light, to show it better and more clearly. He tries to break through the flatness and the blandness of the screen which can easily reduce and remove the physicality and contours of people and objects. He stresses the materiality of nature, humans, and things in the way he chooses and shoots his images. It may be the deafening sound of factory machines churning without end, a row of meat carcasses on hooks passing before us like mass-produced dummies, the wash on a line swaying in the wind behind run-down tenements, or it could be the close up of an orange plastic dustpan, a sparkling stream, or the face of a Spanish peasant held still on the screen for a long time.

His work has a certain fatalism — such as images of men breaking stones or women sewing on an assembly line — especially when he uses the image of the circle, as in DIARY (1972), which has prominent shots of a pregnant belly or a wall being built around a hut. But the films also imply hope — the belly will give birth, the skin disease in the Cameroons is being treated. However, he faces a danger of reproducing the very problems being tackled, for example in fetishizing objects, junk and violence, or relativity without a moral stance. And he also may seem unrealistically romantic about the simple life close to nature, in the vein of "small is beautiful," as in FLAT JUNGLE (1978).

Van der Keuken, in common with many intellectuals of his age, embraced pacifism. He then came to support armed national liberation struggles and left libertarianism. His political commitment has developed as he has learned from those he has filmed. He no longer observes contradictions, networks of power and the interaction of societies and classes without also hinting at future avenues for action. But he never gives more than a hint and always questions all fixed ways of thinking.

Broadly speaking, van der Keuken looks forward to a decentralized, democratic socialism based on multifaceted communities and self-help. Such a political philosophy is not surprising, given that he is making his own films, controlling his own work, and using the cutting room as a political classroom. He films the

individual in a working or creative environment rather than show the leadership of a trade union or a political party grappling with state power. Yet, the effects of fighting for that power are clearly present, most dramatically in shots of President Allende and the Chile coup in THE READING LESSON (1973), which film looks at how and what we are taught to read and at the relation of textbooks' images and language to imperialist values. Culture's role in maintaining the status quo of political power figures again in VIETNAM OPERA (1973), which was made when a revolutionary liberation troupe visited Amsterdam's main theatre. Yet, apart from THE PALESTINIANS (1975), none of van der Keuken's films has attempted, at a national level, to indicate a strategy for carrying out the revolution he acknowledges is vital.

His questioning films do have democratic implications. His democratic philosophy about media making begins in a very personal way from the moment he operates the camera, through the way he interviews people on film recording his voice as well, to how he transforms the footage in editing. He challenges the authority of the screen and of the filmmaker and, like Brecht in the theatre, he tries to hold an audience while at the same time asking the audience to stand back from the film and see it in perspective. He exploits the contradiction between the reality of the film and the obvious unreality of the way he has shown real things. "Thereby," he says to an audience, "you too can change society, or at least think about it in a way which might lead you to want to change it and believe that such change is possible."

The first film in which van der Keuken felt in his element was BLIND CHILD (1964), which he decided to make after reading a booklet by the Institute for the Blind on how blind children form images of the world. His interest went beyond the obvious one for a filmmaker, for whom seeing is paramount. The whiteness of the screen is the opposite of the blind's absence of light, and for the seeing, this absence is unimaginable. Blind children's discoveries are necessarily tactile and, as van der Keuken puts it, egocentric. In HERMAN SLOBBE/ BLIND CHILD II (1966) van der Keuken gives a portrait of one of the boys he had met at the institution while filming BLIND CHILD. He refines the first film by exploring not just blind people's personal adjustments but their social ones as well. We see Herman going to the fair, talking about sexuality, recording his own version of a favorite pop tune, and commenting on the music he likes. Van der Keuken extends the social context by referring to the bombing of Hanoi and James Meredith in Mississippi.

Here Van der Keuken goes beyond our preconceptions of what a film about a blind child might deal with and thus beyond our expectations of what a documentary might offer. He does not show the blind child as a sentimental object of pity and charity, or as inferior because of a terrible affliction. Against grainy black-and-white town scenes, which have a strange, distancing effect, the film begins with van der Keuken's voice saying it will take place on the streets between his house, Herman's house, and the institution where Herman lives during the week — "thousands of kilometers of well-ordered chaos".

Van der Keuken's attempts to define a world by beginning with the individual and working outward lead him to shoot many different means of transportation and communication. We always see cars, buses, trains, boats and carefully picked roads, given their own cinematic weight by being held on the screen longer than

expected. People's "spaces" that are joined by such means of transportion are equally well caught and examined as if under a microscope.

Offices are shown row upon row, identical, down long corridors, faceless, anodyne. People's rooms are usually cramped. We see a woman bending down all the time on a barge or the poverty of a shanty town. All these are explored in detail. The camera pans, stares, or returns to rest on a picture or a chair, all the time registering the human side of these environments, such as the fisherman's home with a painting of a boat. Links between these "spaces" which could depict the plains, the mountains, a factory in Holland, or a farm in Africa, are established by the camera and not by the people in the film. Van der Keuken often uses shots of windows. He can change from interior to exterior, from individual to society, or from one place or time to another, but the people he films are often blocked, trapped or broken.

In BEAUTY (1970), van der Keuken built a whole film around how a hostile, alienated society cripples our subjectivity. The "free" movements of nature, such as the flowing stream, the flowers blowing in the wind, are contrasted with the "closed," uptight actions of a detective, ironically called Beauty, who is hired by wealthy, powerful businessmen to carry out a "job." He investigates by measuring and weighing everything from a broom to someone's nose, but he cannot solve the case. Modern life in heavily industrialized societies is quantified, reduced to statistics, and we are "unhappy." Beauty, like our society, turns to violence, viciously stabbing and slashing a human torso, stubbing cigarettes on it until a person is shot by another, who turns out to be himself. This theatrical, melodramatic and stylized use of the detective story genre allows van der Keuken to satirize with painful seriousness. For example, Beauty receives congratulations in front of a fluttering Stars and Stripes. He wears dark glasses, the symbol of macho competence, but they reflect back whatever he is looking at. He seeks reality but cannot recognize or find it.

Beauty has a double meaning in Dutch. The word *schoon* stands for "clean," suggesting here an authoritarian obsession with order and hygiene as well as with cleaning up society and ridding it of undesirables. It also stands for "beauty," used to sell chocolates or shampoo or High Art, all of which mask our real relation to nature.

Van der Keuken has a preoccupation with consciousness that figures, perhaps idealistically, throughout his films. In SPIRIT OF THE TIME (1968) van der Keuken presents a collage of "drop-outs," protesters (both left and right), musicians and "hippies." He organizes these figures around an idea of "mental readjustment," otherwise known as the counterculture. Acting upon a political and social withdrawal into self, they have tried to find new ways of living together. Crucial to their phiosophy was a new notion of time that came from Eastern philosophy and the drug experience. Van der Keuken tries to explore this new consciousness by holding shots still for a "long time," by cutting back and forth, by speeding shots up or repeating them or reversing them, by running sequences forward and backward. A male face in close up changes its makeup like an actor with new masks: Hitler, a clown, a werewolf, Christ, a black face, an accentuated woman's face, a 19th century gentleman's face, a French courtier's face, and so on.

He asks us, as we try to change our external self in a fashion-conscious age, who we

are, what our identity is, and how we signal to each other who we are. Disrupting everyday methods of watching, listening, and assessing time and the exterior aspects of a person's personality, van der Keuken reproduces the 1968 generation's search in his cinematic construction. Whether participants or observers, we are equally without fixed solutions, overwhelmed by an awareness of relativity, having only the individual as a floating axis.

Another film has this kind of preoccupation with time and the same direct impression of living now. It implies scepticism about an objective past that exists separately from our own invention. That is the organizing principle of VELOCITY 40-70 (1970). The city of Amsterdam commissioned it to commemorate the end of World War II and liberation from Nazi occupation, yet 1945 does not appear in the title. Van der Keuken chose 1940, the beginning of the occupation, which he linked to 1970, the year he made the film. He added the word "velocity" to emphasize how movement joins past and present without any historical break and projects into the future. VELOCITY 40-70 takes place only in the present, although you would expect a commemorative film to dwell on the past. A woman who had been in Auschwitz talks about the past, but we see no shots of the camp. The door of an ordinary freight train slams shut, sparking off associations of Jews being carried like cattle to the camps, but we do not see footage of that barbarity. A woman has electrodes attached to her head for an encephalogram, which measures what is happening inside her brain. It's a completely contemporary event, using the latest technology, but it suggests, as in BEAUTY, the Nazis' thorough documentation of their prisoners and total control over bodies — and the genocide that accompanied such dehumanizing "scientific" obsessions.

Even a bombing raid is depicted in a new light. Superimposed over an aerial view of a town, under the humming noise of a flying squadron, we see a formation of matchboxes, like a surrealist shock. Before that, we saw a sequence showing a box of matches on a metal strip and a hand picking up the box to light a match. The matchboxes remind us of the Nazi bombers, but they are also just ordinary matchboxes. The link is not entirely idiosyncratic — matches are used to set things on fire. The long-held sequence of the formation is then intercut with radar stations (communications again). Here van der Keuken assigns the present and the mundane with responsibility for the past. He is breaking down barriers between meanings and functions.

This aesthetic experiment eases up in later films. Symbols are used less, though significance and association are still manipulated. However, the later films are generally less metaphoric. For example, FLAT JUNGLE (1978), commissioned by the Dutch Society for the Preservation of the Shallows, an area stretching from North Holland to Germany and Denmark called the Waddenzee, is basically a militant ecological film. Unhampered industrial expansion (including nuclear power plants) into the Waddenzee threatens the inland wilderness with its mudflats and rare birds, and the expansion also threatens the residents' small-scale economic activity.

Van der Keuken refused to make a "nature" film, which might arouse liberal sympathy and private indignation but do little else. He showed how those worried about nature have a fight in common with those worried about nuclear energy. Shots of anti-nuclear demonstrators precede interviews with farmers attempting to

farm in a small-scale, self-reliant way. Shots of animal and plant life go before an interview with a trade unionist, who wants his industry to expand so as to combat unemployment. He is aware of the negative aspects of further industrialization but feels unable to control either process. Van der Keuken links the different issues the people in the area face and says, "Your battles are not separate but one." He shows these battles as not just local but as affecting the whole nation, continent, and entire industrialized western way of life.

In terms of FLAT JUNGLE's effect, Van der Keuken made a more political film than his commissioners had anticipated, and it raised a sharp political discussion of the issues. This throws a new light on patronage, as does THE PALESTINIANS (1975) which Van der Keuken says he had tried to avoid making for quite some time:

> "I was forced to take sides as a political filmmaker. It also involved my whole attitude to filming. I didn't want to reduce the film to only the content, the subject or the political theme."

The politics versus art dilemma kept van der Keuken away from the Palestinian project as long as his mind was more geared to individualistic, aesthetically oriented projects. Now it seemed a challenge he could no longer avoid. He produced a powerful, politically committed statement in support of the Palestinians' right to self-determination, which was what the Palestine Committee in Holland wanted. For van der Keuken, it meant working more at the level of experience, with exposition and self-expression playing a greater part than kaleidoscopic montage. The displaced Palestinians living in camps in Lebanon are caught between Zionism and the Lebanese ruling class. Imperialism cuts across the Jew/Arab divide, and the film places responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the European ruling classes who allowed anti-semitism and nazism to flourish. Palestinian camp life, makeshift hospitals, military training of children, and a funeral of villagers murdered by the Israelis punctuate this story. It is characterized by deep emotion and images of daily routine, shot with van der Keukens characteristic calm and perceptive eye. It is framed by an opening sequence showing documentary photographs with a neutral voice telling the history of Palestine since the end of the 19th century. The closing sequence shows a lively class in a camp where a teacher goes through these same points with his children — old facts renewed by a current reality where knowledge of them, personally and politically, becomes a matter of life and death.

Giving people back an image of themselves that they can use is important for van der Keuken. He works on the margins of the film industry and lets those on the margins of society whose voices are not usually heard speak through his films. Of course, the end result is van der Keuken's and not theirs. This can prove a problem. Once, a group of black teenagers whom he had filmed for THE WHITE CASTLE (1973, the second part of the triptych North-South) reacted badly to the film. He had shown them the first part of the triptych, DIARY. There, the scenes of Africa had been a way into the film for them. But in THE WHITE CASTLE they could not see what they had to do with images of the poor Spanish people of Formentera. The fragmented montage had placed the screen images of the teenagers a long way from the images they had of themselves.

Similarly, in Lima some of the battling, self-ruled community of Villa el Salvador

could not understand their juxtaposition in THE NEW ICE AGE (1974, the third part of the Triptych North-South) against deaf workers in Holland. The film's goal was to question western-type capitalist industrial development by including this theme of deafness and portraying alienated working conditions. Van der Keuken's relativity may have a thematic unity in his films, but when this political aesthetic is tested against the lives of those making real political choices, his univeral approach may seem inadequate because it embraces too much while defining too little.

The question of the reception of people's images of themselves is very complicated. Van der Keuken deliberately foregrounds it as a problem in his films. This is a political as well as an artistic choice. He feels other political filmmakers too often avoid this issue. To van der Keuken, making and using films in itself poses a problem. Sometimes, but only sometimes, a film's usefulness may become clear after the artist wages a struggle of both a political and perceptual nature, particularly a struggle with one's own perceptions as related to different contending forces in society. A mediamaker has no simple options and nothing is guaranteed.

Van der Keuken sees as much division between cultures and societies as he sees unity between people, and he tries to deal with both. This attempt to represent, in a progressive way, different levels of perception and reality leads him away from a question-and-answer form. His approach is very different from political media which takes up an issue and offers possible resolutions to problems. The way in which THE PALESTINIANS is useful does not make it a better film than those in the triptych. It was made as a "tool" for understanding cause and effect in the Middle East. The contradictions that arise in terms of his films' reception show how difficult the problem is. But despite criticisms, for example, of the texts in DIARY, at least van der Keuken is confronting the issue head on.

DIARY was shot in three countries having different levels of technology — the Camerouns, Morocco and Holland. The film examines north/south relations through the tools people use and how the tools shape their reality and affect their lives, whether it be computer or hoe. The film values each of the cultures, though visually it stresses the creativity of earlier modes of production. We see as a contrast contemporary scenes of dehumanized modem technology. In the lyrical construction of the film, an insistent hope comes through in the face of waste, alienation and disease. The oneness of the vision, pregnant belly juxtaposed against African graves, implies our common responsibility for the system that impoverishes, alienates and destroys.

After the triptych was completed, van der Keuken rewrote some of the printed commentary. While he uses more politically analytic language there, he still deals in totalities. He calls for everyone to change rather than specifically analyze forces and societies. Imperatives takes the place of strategies because van der Keuken is still the privileged white European filmmaker motivated by the thought that he could have been a black schoolboy in Cameroun (DIARY) or a prematurely ageing, retarded woman in a ghetto in Columbus, Ohio (THE WHITE CASTLE). Subsequently, van der Keuken has become more critical of the commentaries for DIARY.

Sharper, harder, and more fragmented, THE WHITE CASTLE was filmed in Holland, the Spanish island of Formentera, and Columbus, Ohio. This second part

of the triptych dispenses with written commentary. The supply and demand world of isolation in which everyone seems to be part of one production line or another does have moments of resistance and hope (e.g., a humming mother rocking her baby to sleep). Van der Keuken's generally pessimistic view is always tempered with these optimistic moments. He contrasts a monotonous, noisy assembly line of seamstresses in Holland with rows of pig carcasses moving down a line on hooks. But then contrasted with these two dehumanizing lines he shows a human chain passing buckets of water at a summer camp in the USA — a production line put to social use.

People are victims barely understanding the systems that oppress them. The generation-old routines of Formentara continue in spite of the penetration of tourism and the disposable migrant laborers. The film repeats its main images, changing their significance. The pattern of the film is built up and then shattered, then rebuilt again as the film moves toward the white castle.

Longer sequences of interviews with three teenagers are bracketed by this breaking up of the other images, creating a tension within the film's structure. Two different rhythms come out of van der Keuken's view of the societies he intercuts as the camera progresses toward the white castle. Our first glimpse of the castle is hazy and occurs about 20 minutes into the film; the next comes 20 minutes later and is a little clearer; the next five minutes later, and so on. These "discoveries" are accompanied by heavy rain and a flashing police car, a black teenager talking about the need for mass action to change the U.S., and workers discussing occupying their factory. The white castle turns out to be a 24-hour roadside cafe selling fast food in Columbus. It's a precise and suggestive metaphor, followed by a sequence in a juvenile detention center, showing its orderly rows of white, clean beds. Parallel to the gradual unmasking of the castle by the camera are shots of curtains and windows. Can the people on the inside see what is happening outside their own lives?

Van der Keuken intensifies this theme of blocked senses, of people cut off, especially those living in the so-called first world in the last part of the triptych, THE NEW ICE AGE (1974). Three sisters and a brother, unskilled workers at the same machine in the local ice cream factory, feel depressed because they cannot change the system they know oppresses them. The family suffers from deafness, which also affects their writing and speech, the basis of communication. In contrast, the shanty towns around Lima, exploited by U.S. multinational corporations, are full of garbage picked over by pigs, dogs, and humans as well. But dies places also have pockets of hope. We see a stormy meeting in which shantytown villagers thrash out the democratic rules by which they are hoping to live.

Van der Keuken continued the work of the triptych in THE MASTER AND THE GIANT (1980) and THE WAY SOUTH (1980-81), cinematic notebooks from a journey that he made from Holland through France to Egypt. It was first shown on television as three shorter pieces which he then re-edited into a single longer film.

THE MASTER AND THE GIANT, shot in Holland and Tunisia, takes the theme of north-south polarity to its furthest experimental extreme. A strain between "actual" and "artificial," between reality and representation, becomes heightened by the use of actors performing in a melodratic style with obviously theatrical gestures.

Sometimes text and action seem dislocated, and sometimes we hear sync sound speech but cannot grasp the meaning. This daring film often has the feel of dream and the tone of nightmare. The commonplace relations of art and myth, master and servant, and heaven and hell are transformed as we see images of different cultures shaped by the dominance of one over the other and the exploitation of one by the other. The only difference between migrant laborers and cattle is a passport, which becomes the freedom to be slaughtered away from home.

In another commemoration film, van der Keuken sums up his recent experiences as a filmmaker. ICONOCLASM: A STORM OF IMAGES (1982) was made to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Milky Way (Melweg). The Milky Way is a multimedia venue in Amsterdam, which van der Keuken captured in THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME; it was established in the spirit of the '60s and became an international center of counterculture. Van der Keuken's free but highly formalized composition creates a milky way of images on the screen, drawing on drama, poetry and particularly music — rock, new wave, Afro-Caribbean and punk. Caught up in this storm, which has its calms as well as its tempests, are six people for whom the former milk factory is a haven. Some live and work within the mainstream of society, like Steve the welder. Others, like Angela or Karin try to exist in opposition to it by living as squatters or playing in a band or demonstrating for peace. ICONOCLASM depicts a jigsaw of a generation, as did THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME. Van der Keuken shows what has survived and what has not, what has changed and what has remained the same about the counterculture.

Returning to similar themes again and again, van der Keuken restlessly tries to achieve "a broad form of beauty, doubt, fear and belief." He catches various layers of reality and perception rather than isolate a subject. He often cannot give answers. He knows that the latter may be more immediately useful but not necessarily more true. Nevertheless, this "lone wolf" of the independent cinema hopes that his films will become part of the continual struggle to find some of those answers.

I Love Money
An avant-garde look at money

by John Hess

Johan Van der Keuken's recent film, I LOVE MONEY (written as I + a graphic of a heart + $, imitating the style of recent bumper stickers), is a long travelogue/ discourse on the subject of money. In each of a number of major financial centers (e.g., Amsterdam, Geneva, Hong Kong), Van Der Keuken, using a very personal visual style "visits" both money men (always males who are involved in financial markets and speculation) and poor people struggling to get by. In each city he takes us to the high tech or baronial headquarters of the money men and the impoverished haunts of the poor. He contrasts the smug assurance and stability of the money men to the travails and insecurity of the poor.

The film is based on this straight-forward contrast between rich and poor. At this level it is surely a powerful and important contribution to thinking about the world capitalism has created. That the poor are almost always third world people, often living as immigrants in the metropolitan countries, adds another dimension and evokes a constant theme in Van der Keuken's work (the unequal relationship between the first and third worlds). And, of course, many conventional left and even liberal documentary films are based on this obvious contrast between rich and poor. They often use narration or interview material to explain why this difference exists, how the poor feel about their position, what people are doing to change their own or their class's poverty, and so forth.

And here is where Van der Keuken's work differs from all other films I know of that treat this issue of rich and poor. To begin with the contrast is only partly a contrast. Everyone seems equally possessed by illusions about money and its abstract powers. The rich can't imagine why or how things might be different — and neither can the poor. Both the winners and the losers in the money game want only to play better and increase their chances for success. To this extent, at least, Van der Keuken's juxtapostions are static, oppositions without any dialectical relationship, immune from change.

The filmmaker adds a second contrast. Interwoven into these "visits," these interviews, are numerous enigmatic and quite beautiful images of urban and natural scenes — trees, snow seen through a window, parks, water flowing out of a pipe — showing his photographer's eye. These shots seem designed to counter the

frantic money market segments and the busy interactions with the poor. These images add moments of tranquility and a feeling of permanence. They seem to offer the hope of life beyond money, so to speak, a more natural life based on a simple relationship with nature. I find these images interesting and thought provoking. It seems he wants to point out that nature is tangible and permanent while money is intangible and corrupting of the spirit — as much for the poor as the rich. Let's look more closely at the film's images to see how Van der Keuken elaborates these contrasts.

I LOVE MONEY opens with an image which stands as a complex metaphor for the whole film. In the shot, that is repeated later during the Hong Kong section, we see through the distorting effects of some sort of curved window glass. We see three things through this glass, three separate planes of the downtown shopping district of any large capitalist city — signs, windows, entrances. In the middle ground, and most prominent, we see compressed, yellow vehicles coming towards us from both sides, turning abruptly at the point of greatest distortion in the middle, and then going away from us. In the foreground we see elongated silhouettes of people passing in both directions. Though we see these three planes quite clearly, their actual relationship might be quite different than I have described. My description is based on the assumption that we are looking through a glass display window across a sidewalk congested with pedestrians, then across a street with mostly yellow cars (taxis?) to the shops on the far side of the street. It's possible we are actually looking at a toy display and various reflections in the window. What we are actually looking at is far less important, however, than the connotations of the image, connotations heightened by the distortions.

The first signified of this complex sign is urbanity/ modernity. As this shot reappears in the Hong Kong section, I assume it belongs there. In any case, we are seeing the shopping district of a major capitalist city. The film's locations are Amsterdam, New York, Hong Kong, and Geneva. As in many of his films, Van der Keuken is concerned about the relationship between the advanced capitalist countries, on the one hand, and the underdeveloped third world, on the other. In his many interviews with money men in this film, he frequently asks about the third world debt and the effect these debts have on countries struggling to develop. The film juxtaposes the white male money men (even in Hong Kong) with poor families working in these cities. As money knows few boundaries, so also does labor. We meet a Puerto Rican family in Nev York and a Portugese family in Geneva. To Van Der Keuken these people's difficult struggle to makes ends meet somehow relates to the giddy financial speculation of the money men. This relationship is the essence of modernity to the filmmaker.

The second signified is traffic/ commerce/ exchange. These cities are among the major financial markets in the capitalist world. And the subject of the film is money. In each city we visit money/ commodity/ stock markets and watch the frantic buying and selling. Van der Keuken plays off more ordinary forms of money exchange against these high-powered markets. We see men gambling at card tables set up in a park, neighborhood street markets and small businesses. In Spanish Harlem a black youth studies at a computer in the family apartment behind their Puerto Rican eatery. He wants to learn business so he can expand the small family business down to the financial district of New York. At both ends of the economy, money plays a central role. At neither end does anyone seem to really understand it

very well. For example, when asked about the problem of third world debt, the money men blame it on others or claim nonchalantly that it can be handled. In some ways the film is about false consciousness. The dominant ideology is that of the dominant class — and that seems to be it. The only contradicting power is the artist's eye and hand.

The third signified is distortion. Money, like the glass in the image, distorts life. And Van der Keuken uses film technique to distort what he sees. Most obviously, throughout the film he constantly reframes his images with slight but distinct movements of the camera and apparently wanders away from his subject. While a banker talks about money, Van der Keuken examines the drapery behind the man, continually refraining as if searching for the perfect shot to show the material. It's as if the filmmaker, too, were looking for something real and material to offset the man's metaphysical talk about money as the life blood of the economy. Where in this abstract world of money can one find some stability? Where is the proper perspective? In the home of the Puerto Rican family, he also reframes constantly. Here too he finds nothing to hang on to. Inside the mother works hard to feed her customers, while the son dreams of his future business success. Outside we see the urban devastation and drug busts. Money, its lure and one's need for what it will buy seem to overwhelm rationality.

A final signified is fetishism (giving enormous power to and even worshiping our own creations). Money is the ultimate fetishized form. We attribute to it enormous powers which are only a result of our labor. In the all his conversations with money men they speak of money as something that has a life of its own. To them it is seen as a very exciting game, not unlike football or baseball, with winners and losers. To them the speculation is a drug they can't live without. They confess to greed without shame, even seeing it as a positive force that keeps the economy going.

Yet it remains unclear to me what we might learn from all this. What does Van der Keuken want us to do with his investigation of money? I don't see how he helps to defetishize money for us. The only center of rationality is the filmmaker's eye, which is important and encouraging. He validates the possibility of another view. And yet the view seems also elitist to me in that no one else is included. He seems to despair of others seeing what he sees.

I admire his ability to seek out and find in the ordinary stunning images, which seem somehow to redeem the senselessness he finds in capitalist society. Yet, these images imply, necessitate even, a distance that prohibits a dialectical interaction with capitalism in a way that would explain and demystify it. Van der Keuken ultimately finds no counterweight but his aesthetic sensibility. Though powerful indeed, it is inadequate for the task he assigns it.

Inside Women Inside. Suzanne, Suzanne.
To Love, Honor, and Obey

Hurting women

by Loretta Campbell

Women are governed by social mores that prevent them from fully exercising their human rights. State policies, male violence, and women's own socialization facilitate the abuse of women. Three films distributed by Third World Newsreel examine the range of how women get abused. INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE; SUZANNE, SUZANNE; and TO LOVE, HONOR, AND OBEY look at the physical abuse of women, as it occurs in the United States. The films are structured within a framework of oppositions: feminism versus patriarchy, the individual versus the state, and humanism versus materialism.

In the film, INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE (Christine Choy and Cynthia Maurizio, 28 min, color, 1978) the filmmakers interviewed prison inmates who gave an analysis of the penal system. As one inmate put it, "You don't get the feeling like you being reformed, you get the feeling you're getting oppressed." Prisoners, in this documentary, bear witness to what incarceration means to women. At the tame time, none of the women interviewed tells exactly what crime she committed. This atmosphere of oppression lets prison be viewed as a metaphor for abusing women. The crimes seem like acts of survival committed by poor women (crimes mentioned in the film are forging checks, prostitution, drug abuse). The causes and effects of the women's crimes are shown as more important than the crimes themselves.

Confined in these spaces, the women work. Their labor is regulated by a series of State agents, i.e., wardens, prison guards and trustees. The other "officials" shown are the counterparts of State agents who more frequently govern the lives of non-incarcerated women. These are the middle class purveyors and preservers of the dominant culture — educators, clinicians, clergy, spouses, et al.

Prison labor, as one of the inmates states, is not skilled labor. There is little consideration for workers' safety. We watch some women at sewing machines doing piece work. As a prisoner describes their work, we see other prisoners struggling with heavy crates containing groceries, some of which weigh 40 pounds or more. It is another task for which the women are not paid despite the severity of the work. There was no mention of rest periods.

Inmates state that recreational facilities are lacking. The women seem to have neither a gymnasium nor any organized recreational activity. The camera pans across the prison grounds, a monotonous landscape broken up by cinderblock houses and dying shrubs. This shot of prefabricated structures, with the camera acting as an universal eye, presents this prison as representative of all prisons. We believe an inmate when she says that even walking around outside for exercise feels discouraging. The conditions under which these women are imprisoned make any kind of respite impossible. This oppression created by their living circumstances, in effect, keeps them in their place.

In TO LOVE, HONOR, AND OBEY (Christine Choy and Marlene Damm, 55 min, color, 1980) the filmmakers examine the plight of battered women. While the soundtrack plays Ella Fitzgerald singing, "Our Love Is Here to Stay," we look at snapshots of bruised and swollen women. Victims from various ethnic backgrounds pose rigidly in these photographs — resembling poses in mug shots. The photos present the victims looking like criminals. Choy and Damm are making a statement about the way society tries to make women responsible for their abuse.

The State and its agents, as shown in these films, function in collusion against battered women. Victims talk about the insensitivity to their suffering on the part of law enforcement officials and the criminal justice system. The film aptly demonstrates the validity of such grievances by questioning two police officers responding to a domestic dispute call. The officers give their opinions about the victim's behavior. They do not talk about the behavior of the batterer or possible actions against him. Statements are made by other officials about women's low selfesteem, masochism, and fear of reprisal.

Dr. Paula Caplan, in her book, *The Myth of Female Masochism*, explains how labeling abused women's behavior as masochistic encourages even worse abuse.

"The myth of women's masochism has helped to justify the view of women as appropriate targets of mockery and sexual objectification and depersonalization, as the appropriate people to carry out society's low-status work of housekeeping and child rearing and as the objects of verbal degradation and physical abuse for men who feel frustrated or insecure."(p. 12)

In one of the film's initial shots an elderly woman is being chased onto hospital grounds by her husband, also elderly. A doctor comes to the woman's aid and begins to take her inside. The husband is left outside looking bewildered. Will she go home to this, the viewer wonders. How long has she had to face the abuse of this now old man?

Most of this film is shot inside women's shelters where victims have sought refuge for themselves and their children.

The locations of shelters must be kept anonymous to protect these women and their children from reprisals. The film deals in depth with one particular case where the woman did not have the option of leaving an abusive man and going into a shelter.

Bernadette Powell is currently serving a 15-year sentence in Tompkins County Jail, Ithaca, New York, for the murder of her husband. In TO LOVE, HONOR, AND

OBEY, Powell is interviewed in prison by Choy. Powell's ex-husband had abused her before, which precipitated their divorce. The film makes it clear that the police and criminal justice system have sided automatically with all the batterers of women in this film. Powell's lawyers tell us that she had taken her ex-husband to courts numerous times because of his abuse of her. Yet the court awarded them a joint custody settlement, where Powell would be in contact with a man known to be dangerous.

Then the ex-husband kidnapped Powell and their son and threatened to shoot them. Powell, talking to the camera in what appears to be a visitors' room in the prison, is interviewed in close-up, long takes. Calm for the most part, she talks about the various ways the police and authorities responded to her pleas for help. Finally, she breaks down while explaining how she did everything she could to protect herself; i.e., notifying the authorities, getting a separation and divorce. When her own self-defense resulted in the abuser's death, she was shocked to learn that the law came down on her ex-husband's side. The camera lingers on her faces encouraging us to identify with Powell and wonder what we would have done in her place. As the scene ends, we see her being locked back into her cell.

For many viewers, the question arises of what male victimizers think of their crimes. The film includes a therapy session for spouse abusers. The reason for the men's behavior is revealed best by what they do not say. (The men in this session are all white, which is reflective of the population of that group, not the population of batterers.) Each man interviewed equates his wife with a problem. At the beginning of these interviews, the men are relaxed. However, as they begin to discuss their behavior toward their wives, they display the kind of hostility that they previously vented on the women. Their faces become strained; a few talk confusedly.

For the most part, they blame their abusive behavior on frustration. Frustration, according to them, means their wives' lack of understanding or their own unfulfilled job aspirations. None of the men is repentant. None of them examines the source of his frustration, i.e., the socialization process that teaches battering as a means for males to release frustration. Implicit in the abusers' conversations is the many ways that these men have incorporated violence as an integral part of their self-definition, their manhood. Womanhood, then, means to them and to society at large that women implicitly consent to this violence.

Survivors in TO LOVE, HONOR, AND OBEY are women who lived through violence. Regardless of how long they remained with their spouses (because of financial need, fear of reprisal, or love) before finding help in a shelter, if they came through it alive, they are survivors. When they talk about why they remained with their spouses, many needed money to maintain the family, and many (like my own mother) were reluctant to break up the nuclear family structure.

This film questions this structure. When the women appear in their "defined" roles, i.e., as homemakers (in kitchens, making bed, in playrooms) the presence of children is either onscreen or off. Men and women are not on camera at the same time. The men are never shown with their children, as if to illustrate that their violence has no place in a happy home. We see how survivors of abuse have learned to create new family structures, composed of former abuse victims. The women and children in the shelters live in a communal situation in a new kind of extended

family. Emphasis is finally placed on the wholeness of a nonviolent home.

SUZANNE, SUZANNE (Camille Billops and James Hatch, 30 min, B/W, 1982) deals with women and children's role in consenting to family violence. An Afro-American middle-class family is shown in a home-movie style documentary. The family's status is indicated by a pretty home, stylish clothes, and well-kept neighborhood. Suzanne, the film's subject and narrator, recounts her family's life with Brownie, her abusive father. Filmed after his death, this documentary addresses Suzanne's and her whole family's problems as a result of the father's violent behavior.

Billops described the film, during an interview at the 1983 Womanist Film Festival in New York City, as essentially a home movie about Suzanne's triumph over addiction. The film gives information about Suzanne's father, Brownie, and his part in Suzanne's drug problem. In the film, Suzanne, speaking against a curtain as a backdrop, recalls how she entered into drug use. She said she used tactics to gain her father's attention, which she equated with love. She depended on negative behavior, specifically drug abuse. She says that if her father were alive, "I would ask him why he didn't love me," as she lowers her eyes and reflects on her life. In the beginning, she is afraid to meet the gaze of the camera. As she begins to explain why she had this problem, she self-assuredly stares into the lens.

Augmenting this interview are images taken with the family's home-movie camera and still photos. These portray happy times for the family, but Brownie is not in any of these movies or snapshots. In the majority of the pictures, Suzanne, her mother and her brother are together. With one exception, the photographs of the father Brownie show him with friends and coworkers. In one snapshot, he is alone, holding a can of beer. For him, alcohol seems to have been a substitute for loving his family. Later in the film, Billie, Suzanne's mother, describes how Brownie beat her when he was drunk. Other family members are interviewed about Brownie, and while they all express concern about Suzanne's drug problem, none of them makes the connection between his violence and her addiction.

The texture of the film — the family activities shown and the fact that this was filmed in their home — make SUZANNE, SUZANNE truly a home movie. The look of the film also demonstrates how Suzanne and Brownie's problems were kept inside the family. For while family records can be shown to outsiders, they usually remain a private method for documenting family history. Only the family members looking at the family album usually know the secrets behind the smiling faces.

In SUZANNE, SUZANNE the extended family members continue their daily tasks during Billops' interviews. This depiction of the family adds to the home-movie feel of the film and to its validity, since information unfolds in a kind of "real" time. The family members are comfortable discussing family concerns with Billops for she is Suzanne's cousin, and family members address her, Billops, in familiar terms.

The use of home movies in this film underlines the family's middle-class values. First, during the time of Suzanne's childhood, roughly the 1950s, the ability to record family history with a movie camera was more affordable in the Black community to the middle-class. Second, the family seems to have purposely captured its best moments on film. The middle class has been characterized as enamored of appearances. Without Suzanne's narration in the film, the shots

would indicate that these people are happy.

In one scene, Suzanne and Billie appear in profile talking about their life with Brownie:

> Suzanne: Mom, do you love me?
> Billie: Yes, Suzanne, I love you very much.
> Suzanne: Mom, do you remember death row?
> Billie: Yes, I remember death row — where your daddy used to take you to give you your punishment in your bedroom. I remember that very much.
> Suzanne: Mom, why didn't you stop daddy from beating me?

At this point, Billie tells Suzanne that she (Billie) believed that sometimes Suzanne did deserve punishment though not as severe as Brownie meted out. In addition, Billie was too afraid of Brownie to intervene. Both women agreed that the beatings were violent and left emotional as well as physical scars. Billops captures the sisterhood of abused women in this scene. She also focuses on Suzanne's strength and compassion as a survivor.

In all of these films, women assert their human rights — usually against the oppression of the State and social mores. The batterers in these films represent this oppression. They keep certain members of society in their "place" by using violence and intimidation. As is exemplified in these films, women cannot challenge the status quo if they are overwhelmed by their fight for survival.

Victims in TO LOVE, HONOR AND OBEY, who considered their abusive marriages more important than themselves remained in abusive unions. Those women, especially mothers, who sought outside help only after living for a long time with a violent man (the women were possibly not even aware that help was available) inadvertently fostered the myth that families must be kept intact regardless of the circumstances. The questions raised by the police officers ignore the complexities of this kind of family relation. As representatives of the State, these officers embody its refusal to understand the myriad of problems resulting in family violence. Furthermore the officials' attitude explains the funding problems shelters are burdened with and the insensitivity of clinicians and authorities toward victims of this violence. Worst of all, no authorities advocate tough legal sanctions against violent men. The viewer can conclude that ours is a harsh reality, in which society gives permission for this kind of behavior.

SUZANNE, SUZANNE also tells the same story, in this case, how society is especially tolerant of batterers who are "good providers." Financial comfort, therefore, seems more important than love and respect. In addition, the State placed more emphasis on Suzanne's drug addiction than on the family problems which caused it. These problems were in a sense fostered by the State, and for the State to recognize its role in covering over middle class family violence might have meant admitting social guilt.

While the State is responsible for the rehabilitation of prisoners in INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE, it does not pay the women for the jobs they work at during incarceration. One inmate does mention vocational training offered by the prison. It is not specified which skills are taught. Furthermore, in prison the women

endure physical abuse from police officers and prison guards, "When I got arrested, I was pregnant, I was beaten by the arresting officer," one inmate says.

Inmates who are single mothers must rely on relatives to care for their children. Without this help, the State places the women's children in foster homes. These women are vulnerable to the State where their children are concerned, and once freed — without skills — they remain vulnerable.

SUZANNE, SUZANNE; INSIDE WOMEN INSIDE; and TO LOVE, HONOR, AND OBEY depict a society which is indifferent to the needs of half of its population. By promulgating myths about battering in marriages; by promoting the status of women as underclass; and by praising the dominant style of male-female relations, our society victimizes women. By doing so, as these films outline, society creates the climate for male abuse.

Distribution information

These films are distributed by Third World Newsreel, 335 West 38th St., NYC 10018. (212) 947-9277.

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Appalshop documentaries
Inventing and preserving Appalachia

by Jane M. Gaines

INVENTING A REGION

In *Appalachia On Our Mind*, Henry Shapiro looks at what he describes as the "invention" of a region — not identifying a geographic location or discovering cultural similarities between peoples — but, rather, needing to construct Appalachia as a concept. This concept, as Shapiro sees it, was developed between 1870 and 1900 as a way of explaining the strangeness of a segment of the U.S. population to the rest of the country.[1][open notes in new window] In the 1880s, local-color fiction drew attention to Appalachia. Sophisticated easterners avidly read that fiction and found represented within it the manner of speech and customs of Appalachian characters, here treated as fascinating but inexplicable oddities (Shapiro, pp. 3-31). "Region," then, constructed an indigenous culture burrowed deep into the southern Appalachian mountains and grounded in the mountaineers themselves. "Region" explained the stubborn otherness of the mountain character as a consequence of distant removal and the distinctive anachronism of mountain culture as the consequence of entrapment in time and place.

Understandably, Shapiro's idea that Appalachia is an invention has caused some stir within Appalachian Studies, since that discipline is founded on the premise that a native culture exists in the mountains. The claim that Appalachia is a concept constructed by outsiders as a means of legitimizing their presence in the mountains, whether as "uplifters" or economic developers, disturbs the preferred view that the outsiders *discovered* a pre-existing indigenous culture.

This notion of untouched culture has inspired and rationalized missionary work, educational efforts, folk-culture research, and, most recently, alternative media production activity in Appalachia. What I want to examine here is the way that the documentary filmmaking tradition, especially as developed in the work produced by Appalshop film and video makers, remains deeply committed to the notion of an untouched culture in the mountains and in the mountaineers.

Shapiro's argument that Appalachia is an invention [LINE MISSING IN ORIGINAL] s, particularly as they continue the practice of documentation within

this tradition, a documentary practice which carries with it particular assumptions about culture, nature, and the world that exists before the camera.[2]

Motion picture history reveals a persistent commitment to the view that documentary recording practices, against the conventions of the narrative feature film, capture life as it "really" is — especially since documentary strives to *discover* a subject rather than dramatize it and to strip away the theatrical devices which can be seen as distortions of the natural world. In my view, this tradition of documentary and the idea of a native Appalachian culture waiting-to-bereaved stand as companion myths. Clearly, the documentary practice developed in the region draws on the same philosophical premises which inform Appalachian Studies, premises expressed in the belief that if an authentic culture "out there" could only be retrieved, it could be used as a kind of "truth antidote" against the forces which threaten its extinction.

Within the last ten years, a new theory of documentary has evolved, informed by the poststructuralist concern with the way language organizes its own world and the philosophical challenge to the idea that we can ever objectively have knowledge of a final real world at all, since we can only know it *through* a linguistic system which imposes its own shape. In terms of film, this concern translates into the position that an aesthetic practice, a cinematic language, cannot neutrally reveal a final real world. In particular, documentary, because of its claim to objectivity, seems especially susceptible to the illusion that its practice is transparent.

As film critics in Britain and the U.S. have developed this new understanding about documentary, they have drawn out political implications which are not without consequence for documenting the culture of oppressed peoples.[3] Specifically, this position holds that the documentary practice which remains innocent of its own linguistic intervention is ideologically complicit since, in effect, it denies that versions of the world become constructed to serve particular interests.[4] Most important, such a theory of documentary insists that documentary realism as an aesthetic cannot tell the "truth" about oppressed people.[5]

Although this theory has something to say to documentary film/videomakers about their practice, it also has a certain rigidity. It holds that since the realistic aesthetic is always complicit, the only way to avoid making a politically regressive statement is to produce works which foreground their devices and announce their own intervention. Built into this position is an unacknowledged preference for modernism over realism. In addition, this position advances the idea that avant-garde practice will become politically oppositional by virtue of the formal devices it uses, an idea open to charges of essentialism.[6]

While I want to discuss the implications of using a documentary form, I will also take issue with the idea that the realist aesthetic can never be enlisted in the service of a political analysis. My argument will follow a kind of zigzag pattern as I lay out the case for seeing documentary as a politically naive form and then finally return, in my discussion of the folk documentary feature, HAND CARVED, to the exceptions which would pose a challenge to what has become the hard line of political modernism.[7] Within this discussion I also want to focus on regionalism as a political strategy. In the process I will draw some connections between media-making technique and political theory. But first, I want to offer some historical background as a means of illustrating the continuity between early philanthropists

and contemporary media makers in the southern Appalachians.

PHILANTHROPY

The dilemma for the benevolent worker after the turn of the century was like the challenge facing the Appalshop production group today: Should they help mountaineers to develop "community" on the premise that those people's time-tested virtues would counter industrial society, or should the philanthropists help them to prepare for modernization? This question actually reflects how the attitude of the rest of the country vacillates toward the Appalachian "other," which, as Shapiro shows, changed over the years from a perception of "strangeness" to a conviction that the region was "lagging behind." (Shapiro, p. x) Coincident with the flowering of local color fiction in the 1880s, mountaineers were originally characterized as the United States' true ancestors. Certainly the identification of mountain people as Protestant and Anglo-Saxon made it easier to justify missionaries' efforts, but the image of Appalachians as our ancestors was also continually under threat. Mountain people, if seen as poor and ignorant, could not be model U.S. citizens, particularly if they were prone to feuding, fighting, and making moonshine. (Shapiro, pp. 102-06)

A more satisfactory explanation for Appalachian's "oddness" evolved after 1890, as mountaineers came to be understood as a "folk community." This conception of Appalachia had an added advantage. It yielded the folk-art product, which promised to make benevolence self-supporting. At the same time, outsiders in the region found a new justification for their presence. Although this lost or hidden "community" seemingly existed within the people themselves, the outsiders determined that the folk had to be taught the folk culture that they presumably already knew. Philanthropic work thus meant educating mountain people in their own culture, whether basket-making, weaving, or traditional song and dance. This rationale fostered the Appalachian settlement schools and the folk-culture curriculum at Berea College in Kentucky, but the fame and the stability of these institutions came as much from the economic viability of crafts marketing as from the uniqueness of their educational methods. (Shapiro, pp. 216; 247)

Song and dance, not as easy as handmade household goods to turn to economic benefit, became viable in another way. This more ephemeral culture established the value of Appalachian culture. Shapiro notes that folk music, originally characterized as essentially American or interestingly primitive, acquired connotations of aesthetic worth which helped to establish its high art status and justify its place in museums and art galleries. (Shapiro, pp. 220; 248)

More important, the mountain music tradition provided a folk-cultural pedigree for the Appalachian product, and its genealogy was finally confirmed by British folk music specialist Cecil B. Sharp who collected ballads in the mountains during visits to the U.S. just before the first World War (Shapiro, p. 252-259). The 1917 publication of *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, Sharp's work in collaboration with Olive Dame Campbell, the grand dame of the missionaries, marks the end of the era of benevolence as a solution to the Appalachian "problem."[8] After 1917, Shapiro concludes, Appalachia would no longer seem culturally deviant in a way that would require the philanthropic services it had been receiving (Shapiro, p. 257). The primitive but essential culture Sharp had identified still seemed an aberration, but not from the U.S. norm. Now it seemed a

holdout from modern civilization (Shapiro, p. 261).

The position of the social-change worker in Appalachia in the late 1960s in some ways resembled that of the benevolent worker in 1917. Like the earlier benevolent workers, 60s VISTA volunteers could look back on a failed attempt to normalize mountaineers — this time part of a national campaign to fight backwardness: the War on Poverty. Like fifty years before, the question still remained whether Appalachians needed to prepare for a modern age or whether they needed to develop "community." But would such community help them to completely standoff modernization, or to ameliorate its effects? To encourage the continuance of the "old ways" could, after all, inhibit modernization, as the number of stories about old folks standing in front of bulldozers testifies. The idea of starting a media workshop in the mountains to record and celebrate Appalachian culture, then, would seem to tackle the contradiction between preservation and modernization head on.

APPALSHOP

For the filmmakers, recording technicians, and photographers associated with the Appalshop production center in Whitesburg, Kentucky, preservation and modernization remain a delicate double commitment. Appalshop, today, is housed in a technologically up-to-the-minute plant built in 1981 with federal government, regional government, and private foundation funds. The facility, including television and music recording studios, and a motion picture and theatrical performance auditorium, has more facilities under one roof than any other alternative media production group in the U.S. has ever boasted. In organizing Appalshop, young people from the region actually reversed the pattern of outsider-uplift which Shapiro documents.

As the story goes, they did this by taking over the Office of Equal Opportunity program in filmmaking which trained them. The Whitesburg, Kentucky, program, in addition to programs in Puerto Rico, Hartford, Connecticut, New York City, and Chicago, were established in 1969 to train disadvantaged youth in film production with the aim of pulling them up and out of their neighborhoods by preparing them for film and television industry jobs. Reversing the program's mandate, the Appalachian group decided to keep the technologically trained people in the region rather than let them drain out to the coasts. When the grant was terminated, they kept the equipment instead of returning it to the government. Originally, the shop was to have been situated in rural Pike County, but Whitesburg offered Appalshop the community base that had been stipulated by the grant. Furthermore, this location connected the group by association with the Mountain Eagle, the lone Appalachian town newspaper, which has made its reputation by criticizing the coal companies.[9]

Before the 1984 production of STRANGERS AND KIN, the first of the NEH-funded, history series which mixes documentary footage with dramatization, Appalshop-produced films fell into one of two categories: folk documentaries and people's-struggle documentaries.[10] In this second category I would include films about local social-change efforts such as THE MILLSTONE SEWING CENTER and THE STRUGGLE OF COON BRANCH MOUNTAIN as well as such organizing films as THE BUFFALO CREEK FLOOD: AN ACT OF MAN and COAL-MINING WOMEN. While some of the people's-struggle films are bold political statements,

the folk documentaries, in their intense concentration on the folk product, often seem to have blotted out all consciousness of the coalfield, which is the insistent subject of the struggle documentaries.

One of the fascinations these films hold, then, has to do with the way they appear to have sealed themselves off formally from economic issues. The films I want to discuss here are largely portraits of master craftsmen. Since they do maintain an idea of men as masters of these crafts and agents of history, I use the pronoun "he" to emphasize this.[11] Although my analysis concentrates on CHAIRMAKER, SOUR WOOD MOUNTAIN DULCIMERS, WATERGROUND, TRADITION, CATFISH: MAN OF THE WOODS, MOUNTAIN FARMER, and HAND CARVED, other films such as FIXIN' TO TELL ABOUT JACK, OAKSIE, and WOODROW CORNETF; LETCHER COUNTY BUTCHER share similar features. In addition, since 1979, Appalshop has produced HEADWATERS, a half-hour weekly series aired on the commercial station WKYH-TV in Hazard, Kentucky. Although these community portraits are taped on video, they share many of the film documentaries' conventions.

Although the modernization and preservation issues are more likely to be addressed on the macro-scale of employment opportunities and production facilities, the contradiction between the two issues seems sharpest at the microscale — in the meeting between the mountaineer and the recording device. What I see here is that the use of cinema verité techniques of shooting and cutting shows a kind of cautious respect for the incongruity between the master craftsman and modern technology.[12] I shall analyze this meeting further and show how the cinema verité aesthetic stands as emblematic of the contradictions I refer to here. To do that, I need to make a distinction between the preserving and the evidencing aspects of documentary, in which the former
aspect recovers and the latter aspect proves.

CINEMA VERITÉ AESTHETIC

In the Appalshop folk documentaries, preservation incorporates an important "passing on" process. This process marks these films as different from either the classic ethnographic film, a subgenre of the documentary film, or the straight folklorist record, best exemplified by the work of the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis, Tennessee, whose archival function began with co-director Bill Ferris's recordings of Mississippi Delta Blues singers. In this tradition, the folklore record serves as storage for special knowledge or expertise in, for instance, song performance, furniture construction, or land cultivation.

The promise of new technologies for folklorists has meant a greater ease in capturing a cultural totality in fuller detail. Advanced folklore-gathering tools included first, the audio tape recorder, then the still camera, and finally the motion picture and video cameras.[13] Since information "gathered" on film is not cold data extracted from its context, folklorists have used the medium to root folklore subjects in their milieux. Also, the motion picture or video record approaches the folklore ideal of scientific accuracy since the film or tape record registers facial nuance and body inflection, and its record seemingly is no longer subject to the skill of the transcriber.

The Appalshop documentaries are different from the folklorist record in that they

replace transcriber-observers with cultural recipients, the next generation of Appalachians, heirs to the traditions which must be handed down before those traditions get lost. Thus the cultural transmission process — there but not seen — always brackets the record itself in these films. The "transmission brackets" to which I refer do inevitably shape the shooting situation, because the Appalshop filmmakers defer to cinema verité tradition. However, the signs of transmission may not be intended to become part of the final product in most of these films.

By this I mean that the filmmakers do not plan to shoot footage of their own filmmaking process; however, improvisational exchange may produce moments that remain in the film after the final cut. The cinema verité rule requiring the pretense that camera and crew do not seem present during the filming generally remains adhered to in the folk documents. But because the handing-down process is so integral to the shooting stage, an illusion of the crew's complete invisibility becomes impossible to sustain. Does this cultural transmission then override the rules of cinema verité?

The folk-culture subject of the film passes down the lore to camera and sound-recording crew. That person is addressing the next generation of Appalachians. Although the subject's friendly, reciprocal exchange sets up the probability of dialogue, in their final edited version, the films remain predominantly monologues. The folk subject tells stories and repeats actions for the camera which he may have repeated for years, virtually alone and unacknowledged. Here is where the cinema verité aesthetic and folk culture preservation seem most compatible — the aesthetic respects the solitude of the senior, retired members of the mountain community.

And yet the style also prefigures the demise of a way of life. It produces an image of the "hold out" from modernization as a social isolate. For viewers, the verité style image of solitude contributes to the strong impression that the figure alone on the screen could be talking to himself as much as to unseen others. But social convention more often than not breaks the illusionistic spell in these films. For instance, a joke is shared at the end of HAND CARVED. The subject, alone on screen, is suddenly accompanied by laughter on the sound track, which constructs an entire room full of people in the off-screen space.[14] Although, as I have said, such signs of dialogic transmission may gradually get "erased" in post-production, interviewers' questions or fragments of conversation left in the final cut give these films a folksy sociability that distinguishes them from the straight folklorist record or the classic ethnographic film.

Also, unlike the ethnographic or folklore-record films, the Appalshop folk documentaries in some instances actually thread the cultural transmission process into the film itself, making the "handing down" aspect explicit rather than implicit.

This incorporation of part of the process is one solution to cinema verité restrictions. Giving the cultural recipient a part in the film gets around the verité ban on the intruding presence of ethnographer or interviewer. But it also has the effect of smoothing over the whole so that none of the rough edges of the transmission process seem evident. The handing down may be motivated by pairing the folk master with a folk apprentice, as in CATFISH: MAN OF THE WOODS, in which Tim Wildermuth, visiting from Indiana, hunts herbs with Catfish and supplies the rationale for Catfish's philosophical dissertation on the health benefits of herbal medicine. As heir to the knowledge of dulcimer making

and playing, John McCutchen's presence in SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN DULCIMERS justifies I.D. Stamper's stories and eases the transition between the performance segments and the commentary on the history of the musical instrument.

On the part of the Appalachian filmmakers who are adept in the uses of motion picture and video technology, the preference for cinema verité suggests a profound ambivalence toward modernization. As this gets worked out in the films themselves, the filmmakers and equipment stand for the intrusion of technology. Thus, because of cinema verité conventions, film process becomes banished from the folk portrait. But filmmakers and recording instruments continually crop up in the picture. Like the myth of a pure, untouched folk culture in the mountains, the cinema verité myth of virginal transmission is no longer possible to maintain.

While an older documentary theory and practice has historically provided political cover for film/videomakers, more recently, film theory and Left activism have made the maker's relation to the documentary subject a political issue. As theorist and film/videomaker Chuck Kleinhans points out, "the maker's own position in relation to the events depicted becomes part of the heart of the work," since the race, class, and gender position of the makers may become magnified in the production process.[15] Maker-subject power difference always remains a sensitive issue for social-change media producers. They want to eradicate the inequities which their final work may inadvertently reproduce. In addition the documentarist's position stands as a special concern in the ethnographic subgenre, for the power gap between makers and their other-culture subjects is so significant.

While the ethnographic filmmaker studies the exotic culture from the outside in order to represent it to his or her own culture (Nichols, p. 238), the Appalachian filmmaker stands in an unusual position as a cultural insider, or she represents mountain traditions to Northern outsiders as well as to other Appalachians.

Thus, the difficult question to ask about the Appalachian folk documentaries is this: To what extent do they register class distinctions between college-educated media producers and less privileged mountain people? Here, I would argue that the cultural continuities between Appalachian subjects and film/video makers are stressed at the expense of dealing with social class. Again, strict adherence to the cinema verité aesthetic insures that no hint of power difference between makers and subjects is leaked.

As I noted before, issues taken up by the people's-struggle films produced at Appalshop are strangely missing from the folk documentaries. Consciousness of the coalfield economy as well as an awareness of social class differences are concerns which disappear in the folk portraits. This absence seems to be reinforced by two different ideological premises — the first characteristic of the folklore approach to history and the second specific to Appalachian film and video production.

In history as represented through folklore, the passage of time often takes the bite out of class exploitation. Hard times seems softened by the "honesty of toil" and closeness to the land. In CHAIRMAKER, Dewey Thompson's description of working as a farm hand for fifty cents a day and as a logger for most of his life gets treated in a lyrically nostalgic style. He tells the story of the last chairmaker in the

county. Romanticizing work has further implications in connection with regional strategies for social change and I will return to this in a later section.

CRAFT AND TECHNOLOGY

Probably the most effective argument made by the Appalshop group for seeing themselves as similar to the folk is the comparison they make between producing media and practicing folk craft. This second ideological premise, which works to deemphasize social class, depends on the idea that one makes an honest living by practicing a craft, providing for oneself by means of a special skill, whether filmmaking, chair-making, or music-making. This strong conviction has a particular regional irony, because in Appalachia today it is not possible for either a mountaineer or an alternative media worker to live for an entire year on the income produced from one's craft.

The idea of filmmaking as analogous to a folk art such as chair-making becomes problematic in another way, for the art of classical cinema, especially classical documentary, involves concealing the marks of one's craft.

For instance, the expert documentary photographer learns to smoothly follow focus, or adjust the focal length of the camera lens so as not to call attention to changes in the distance between subject and camera that will register as "out of focus" in the image. In the classical narrative and documentary traditions the professional editor learns to "cut on movement" and "cover" cuts with voices-over in order to disguise editing-so as to piece together a visual coherence in such a way that the piecing remains undetectable to the eye. The crafting analogy holds up even less when the trend toward video and away from more expensive film processes is considered. Electronic video editing eliminates the hands-on-the-material step which film cutters consider the essence of crafting.[16] "Craft" in film or video finally means camouflage — creating the illusion that there is no craft. This becomes the opposite of building, carving, or weaving an aesthetically pleasing object, which leaves the maker with something to show for his artistry. The finished documentary work certainly stands as a concrete art object. But in the ethnographic subgenre into which these films can easily fit, the film should reveal, through mechanical recording, something *other than* the film itself. Content becomes everything in the ethnographic tradition.

"HAND CARVED is a lovely machine-made tribute to fading handmade craftsmanship," says a review of the film in the *Washington Post*.[17] Here the analogy between media production and traditional craft works a deception. The analogy denies that the relation between the rise of mechanical and electronic technologies and the demise of the craft is one of cause and effect. The mountaineers in the folk documentaries sometimes express different sympathies since they have experienced machine technology as a direct threat to the handmade object's survival.

Chester Cornett, who takes two months to make an eight-legged chair, describes how he had to design these curiosities in order to beat production-line competition. While the film illustrates the perfection of the hand-carved holes in close up, in voice over Chester explains why he couldn't get the results he wanted by using a power lathe. But the mountaineers' objections are finally quieted. By bringing the handmade object face to face with the recording machine, the threat is denied. The

machine seems to protect endangered culture as it preserves it. And the folk documentaries argue that we do have humane uses for advanced technology after all.

If the preserving function of media technology lends itself to the view that there is an endangered body of folk culture which can be recovered intact with the help of more efficient and precise instruments, the evidencing function supports the view that this culture is indigenous, flourishing like wildlife in its native habitat. In both the documentary and ethnographic traditions, the cinema sign or image often becomes regarded as having an evidential status in the way it serves as a source of authentication. (Nichols, p.239) This "realist" position, as it is called, holds that cinema has a special relation with its subject matter because its photographic processes produce a measurable imprint of the world before the camera. Realism, fully elaborated as an aesthetic in the earliest theories of film as art, has since been challenged in academic circles although it still persists in popular belief.[18] Since popular belief colors both production and reception of documentaries, we can safely say that technologically recorded images stand to most people in the culture as hard evidence of the existence of the real world referent.

VOICE

The folk documentary makes its most convincing argument for the existence of native mountain culture by offering the photographic image as verification. However, this proof becomes undeniably reinforced by other "reality cues" provided by sound recording and editing techniques. Mountain speech, marked by characteristic inflections, may work as an especially convincing sign of true or authentic Appalachianness. To achieve the effect of mountain people really speaking, the films use synchronous sound, an illusion created by matching the magnetic-tape record of an interview with the motion-picture-film record of the same.[19] In addition, documentary location-sound makes use of an audio cross-section of a particular place to anchor the subject in his milieu, as, for instance, with the crickets and roosters picked up by microphones which locate Dewey Thompson in the rural mountains. The native speech challenges the outsider's ear, and too much characteristic background sound or "presence" may seem like interference to some audiences.

Since the realist aesthetic here depends so strictly on the equation between native speech and authenticity, a clarifying narrator — either a disembodied voice or a screen presence — would seem an intrusion. Appalshop educational distribution has responded to viewers' possible difficulties with the rough sound track and the mountain speaker by including a transcript with each film, a practice which also seems to confirm the influence of the folklore-gathering tradition, in which cultural content becomes carried by verbal language as much as nonverbal visual and aural rhythms.

In CHAIRMAKER, Dewey Thompson's speech, synchronized with his image, functions as verification. Also, separated from the image, his voice can magically cover cutaway shots (such as the image of the photograph of John Kennedy), which are placed in the film in the editing stage. Once established as integrally belonging to the subject and his world, the voice "laid over" the track gives the impression that Dewey Thompson has continued to talk in the same space and time.

What the viewer actually sees on the screen, though, is a reassembled version of Thompson's backwoods, front porch, living room, and woodshed. Because viewers know and accept cinematic rules for building space with various shots, they will understand these segments as meaning: "This is a mountain home." The lyric realism of this style of editing blends the directional flow of movements, whether chopping, sawing, or shaving wood, and encourages the viewer to perceive continuum instead of discontinuity. Here, documentary realism, the style so often associated with anti-illusionism, actually delivers its impression of the real world by means of continuity editing, the illusionistic technique used in constructing theatrical fiction films.

The classic documentary stance depends upon a belief that there could be some reality before the camera which was still untouched by human social intervention. This stance has certain political implications. As Eileen McGarry, in her article on documentary has pointed out, it is "...a form of ideological mystification to speak of an innocent or neutral reality, apart from human practice, since that can only be an attempt to deny or obscure intention and process (politics)."[20] To conceive of folk culture as a core of common experience that goes so far back in history that it can remain beyond the reach of human development is to say that there are some things that are the way they are "by nature"; that their meanings are self-evident and not particular versions that benefit one group's point of view more than another's.

WHAT IS NATURAL?

Finally, to see folk culture as "natural" conceals the stages of its historical production, making it more difficult to grasp the possibilities for changing the course of that process of construction. Even the most apparently "natural" phenomenon — the mountains or the folk — will have an accumulated representational history as it is transposed from one medium of communication to another. The scene or event before the camera, popularly understood as the pure contents of the real world, cannot become communicated without the intervention of some kind of semiotic practice, whether verbal or visual language.[21] Even decisions made about the real world which the film will document, from the selection of locations and subjects to the choice of format, are acts of intervention in a process which people generally consider not intervening (McGarry, p. 51). The point is that wherever the filmmaker places the documentary camera, even in the remotest wild or in front of the most rare manifestation of folk culture, social practice has visited there before and was shaped in accordance with the prevailing definition of things.

The log cabin, for instance, which seems to be such a natural feature of mountain life, stands before the arrival of recording equipment as an image already encrusted with meanings. This historic representation is, furthermore, thick with political significance-the symbol of an age of American heroism. Shapiro traces the association of the log cabin and Abe Lincoln's Kentucky boyhood back to a speech made on behalf of the mountain people to the American Missionary Association in 1892. Thereafter, the log cabin would represent "nobility which seemed to accompany a particular kind of poverty and the dedication to individual freedom" (Shapiro, p. 89).

Recruited as an image in such films as SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN DULCIMERS

and CHAIRMAKER, the log building carries connotations of frugality, integrity, and heroism. If folk culture in the Appalachian mountains has been historically produced or "invented," as Shapiro says, the folk documentaries stand as a cinematic construction of a mythic construction. To situate Dewey Thompson in relation to his cabin home and to choose to show him drawing water from a well is not to record impartially but to construct again the romantic version of mountain life. And that romance, over time, has not served the interests of mountain people. What interests, then, does it serve?

David Whisnat, in *All That Is Native and Fine*, speaks more specifically than Shapiro about the nature of these interests and supplements Shapiro in important ways. In this study of the Hindman Settlement School, the White Top Folk Festival, and the Campbells' missionary work, Whisnat argues that these cultural "intervenors" were able to define Appalachian culture for U.S. society and to "feed it back into the culture itself" where it was perceived as "traditional" or "authentic." [22] Whisnat goes on to say that the concentration on this folk identity has deflected attention away from, as he says, "dominant structural realities, such as those associated with colonial subjugation or resource exploitation or class-based inequities." Here, "culture" provides a convenient mask for other agendas of change and throws a warm glow upon the cold realities of social dislocation" (Whisnat, p. 30). This romantic conception of mountain culture, as Whisnat sees it, has historically had a kind of obfuscating halo effect which made it difficult to see that changes in Appalachia during the early part of the century were related to the economic exploitation of the region.

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS

Following Whisnat's line of thinking, however, the economic realities of the Appalachian condition have to do with developments in the "cold" realm of industrial development and not with handiwork, music and lore, the "warm" realm created to divert attention from social upheaval. I would argue that a more thorough political analysis of the Appalachian plight does not necessarily require a shift in attention back to the more obviously political issues and situations featured in the people's-struggle films. It can be found in the folk documents. Here, after having detailed the argument that the style of the folk documentaries implicitly denies politics, I want to change my course and look at the reverse possibility. When I say that a more radical political position can be "found" in the folk documents I do not mean that it is inherent in them. That would be to fall back into the same esssentialism which characterizes the belief that native culture resides out there in the mountains. Similarly, any notion that a style has a particular meaning once and for all also risks essentialism, although I do want to make the point that different aesthetic schools have been historically associated with philosophical positions and that we should not interpret stylistic choices as transparent carriers of content.[23]

We can "find" an economic analysis of the Appalachian situation in the folk documentaries if we make that analysis, since these portraits have the ingredients to begin with. This analysis can begin, for instance, by looking directly at the folk culture object to see how it has been taken for something other than what it is. The cultural artifact, whether hand-made chair, woven rug, or stone-ground flour also represents a product of labor, and, through exchange, the means by which the

producer secures his living. Such productive activity as farming, herb gathering, hog butchering or dog breeding is not a sideline or an avocation for mountain people, although for the urban employed, this work may represent the kind of leisure activity they wish they had time to take up on weekends.

We can look at the Appalshop folk documents, then, as studies of the relation of humans to their product. Taken as a whole, the films provide material for lessons in alternative economics, especially since the principle of organization in these films is the step-by-step labor of constructing the folk object. Narrative commentary, pieced around the steps in construction, touches on the lives of the folk subjects. Their existence intersects with their work. The commentary usually starts with the story of how the craft or skill was learned and turns into autobiography. The speaker refers to marriage, children, jobs, natural disasters, or leaving home and returning from employment in the north or service in the armed forces. These life stories centered on a product are case studies in what might be called resistance economics, or arrangements implicitly antagonistic to capitalist economics.

WATERGROUND shows Walter Winebarger still operating his water-run grain mill outside Boone, North Carolina, according to the method of exchange set up by his father who always asked a low fee for custom-grinding grain. Asked in the film about the difficulty of growing grain to mill for others on such a small scale, Winebarger replies: "It's a living, I guess. I don't never have to go hungry as long as I can eat bread and milk or something."[24] Mountain economics works if everyone eats. Following these principles, farmers barter for the food they don't raise. As Lee Banks explains to his grandson who is shooting the film MOUNTAIN FARMER, his family didn't buy meat or lard for fifty years because they could exchange for it.

The barter system, an exchange of good for good and service for service, in some cases still works in the mountains. Lena Stephens, the midwife in NATURE'S WAY, describes how she receives money from only one-third of the mountain families when she delivers a baby; the rest pay in chickens, pigs, or groceries. The advantage of mountain economics is not only that it is more humane because it is designed to meet basic needs. It also makes social relations clearer to the participants in exchange.

Here I am abbreviating the labor theory of value which Marx laid out in its complexity in Volume I of *Capital*. The social inequities which characterize capitalist societies, from the arrangements of ownership to wage relations, have their origin in the way humans take their product to be something else. Once these products enter into exchange, the things themselves appear to be the concrete, source of value rather than the labor people expended to produce them.[25]

It now seems possible to make a connection between the romanticization of the folk product and strategies for social change in Appalachia based on regionalism. Adapting Paolo Freire's description of how social beings come to have critical consciousness, Helen Lewis compares regional consciousness with Freire's naive stage of political awareness, characterized, among other things, by "nostalgia for the past." Regional consciousness, associated with the middle class, cannot make the sharp analysis of power that class consciousness can. Thus, regional identity priorities may keep Appalachians from seeing the resemblance between their

struggle and the struggles of other oppressed groups.[26] In understanding the Appalachian problem in terms of capitalist expansion, Lewis has been joined by other Appalachian Studies scholars such as Allan Batteau, who concludes his discussion of what is wrong with the energy-colony model of Appalachia with this observation:

> "...to dwell, at too great a length, on the cultural distinctiveness of Appalachia, is to limit the political consciousness of the similarities between the domination of Appalachia and the other structures of oppression in America today."[27]

HAND CARVED AND *CHAIRMAKER*

The newer class analysis of Appalachian society coincides with Shapiro's contention that region is an invention. Both of these I see as parallel developments in the intellectual crisis in Appalachian Studies to which I have referred.[28] Coincidentally I also find evidence of a crisis, let's say, a disenchantment with a romantic, apolitical view of folk culture, in HAND CARVED (1984), one of the most recent Appalshop folk documentaries. This disenchantment becomes evident in comparing HAND CARVED and the earlier CHAIRMAKER (1975).

CHAIRMAKER was the prototype for the first folk documentaries, especially in the way it created the perfect impression for the viewer that the making of the folk product has been witnessed from start to finish. The constructed space of the film as I have described it enclosed the mountaineer as perfect specimen from a lost age. The viewer's sense of being set back in time was jarred only slightly. The signs of changed times were minimal-the photograph of John Kennedy on the wall, the passing car, and the shot of Dewey Thompson's prices posted on a board: $15 for chairs; $25 for rockers.[29] We learn that it is a "hard day's work" to complete a chair, but the film does not help the viewer toward an analysis of the social and economic difficulty of living by means of one's handiwork.

The myth of traditional craft as a way to make a living is not as well sustained in HAND CARVED, the first Appalshop folk documentary to run to feature length. In structure, HAND CARVED seems similar to CHAIRMAKER. It follows the incremental construction of a piece of furniture, but this eighty-eight minute chronicle of Chester Cornett's design and execution of a magnificent rocker becomes much less absorbed than the earlier films in the folk culture myth.

For the audience, the illusion that they have observed every step taken in building the chair, that film time is completion time, is not easily maintained as in CHAIRMAKER. While Chester concentrates on the chair, the season turns from fall to winter, and neighborhood children come to trim his Christmas tree. He says that a chair takes two months to make, but the seasonal changes become clues to the viewer that this chair has taken longer.

HAND CARVED stands out from the other folk art films because it begins to put together a complete economic lesson for the viewer. The film's chronology gets divided by the trip from Pine Mountain, Kentucky, Chester's former home, to Cincinnati, Ohio, the route so many unemployed Appalachians have taken before him. He has moved here, he tells us, because he needs more business than he can find in Kentucky. Chester's price for making a chair is $489, and materials cost him

over $100, he says. Considering what he must pay for rent, clearly Chester could not live without the armed-forces disability payment he jokingly calls his "old age pension." Toward the end of the film an abrupt stylistic change interrupts our concentration on the chair. From a close up of Chester making pegs, we see a dissolve to a high-angle shot of the Cincinnati expressway in winter. The camera zooms out further to show Chester's workshop home, hidden between taller brick buildings. For once, the significance of the folk craftsman in the modern world becomes represented according to scale. The shot is the only one of its kind in the film and an unusual flourish-a divergence from the consistent style of the Appalshop folk documentaries. Like the earlier folk documentaries, HAND CARVED begins with the promise that the dramatic pay off will be in the revelation of the hidden knowledge behind the hand-made wooden chair, the basis of the myth of indigenous culture, but the higher drama becomes the revelation of the discrepancy between the making of the chair and the social existence of the maker.

As we look closely at Chester's chair and his relation to it, we have the beginning of a lesson in how mountaineers have been exploited in terms of their labor power. The lesson of the chair is that as long as the human labor expended to make it does not seem obviously connected with the value it evidences or can command in exchange, the entire economic process — commodity production and the society organized to facilitate it — remains mysterious.

The corollary to this is that as long as the product is exchanged on the basis of usefulness, as in the barter economy which existed in the mountains for a hundred and fifty years, it will not seem a mystery to its producers. Marx's description of commodity fetishism serves as a summary and an illustration by analogy of how it is that we do not see how capitalist production is organized:

> "It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will" (Marx, p.163).

Would that the inequitable economic arrangements we accept as ordinary in capitalist society appeared to us to be as strange as the wooden table standing on its head! Theoretically, following Marx, if one looks long and hard enough at the product, the perversely contradictory nature of commodity production will eventually appear.

An inkling of this economic perversity comes across with the help of Chester's commentary, much of which discusses the disparity between making the thing and its exchange. He once wove baskets which took him a week to complete and people offered him twenty-five or fifty cents apiece for them, he tells us. Finally, he recalls that his Grandpa Fouts spent his life building chairs and wood barrels and that when he died on welfare, the family did not have enough money to bury him.

REALISM

The main thrust of my argument here has been that documentary realism as an aesthetic works in conjunction with the mystique of folk culture to represent the Appalachian social condition as "natural." In recent history, the belief that the natural world is the final arbiter of the real and true has participated in ideologically maintaining "things as they are," as against social change which requires seeing things anew. Thus, given the political implications of using a photographic style which denies its own politics, some alternative media makers and documentary theorists have argued that concerned artists should employ forms which call attention to technique and choice. In films and programs about the disenfranchised, viewers would then be politicized on the aesthetic as well as the social and economic levels.

While this critique has had its influence in academic circles, it has had little to no impact on the style of independent documentary film and video, particularly in the United States. As I have argued here, I think that it is possible to produce works in this style which do encourage political analysis, especially since the weight of the determination is on the side of the viewing context rather than on the side of the work. And yet, what does it mean for the makers, who have constructed a version of the world which embodies a point of view to go along with the dominant audience mindset, that the documentary they are seeing is privy to objective truth?

Finally I see two other practical consequences for using documentary realism in independently produced works. First, I think we have to consider the way lyric romanticism appeals to funding agencies. Since the agencies downplay social science, where issues of economic oppression and inequality might arise, folk culture projects often seem more suitable subjects for state and federal humanities grants. And these grants provide a substantial portion of the budgets for independent regional productions. These are most suitable subjects for state and federal humanities grants. And these grants provide a substantial portion of the budgets for independent regional productions. Finally, the most practical question of all needs to be raised. The documentary mystique, based on multiple takes and religious respect for realness in its most obscure and inaccessible habitat, is an extremely expensive mystique to cultivate.

Alternative filmmakers need not be hampered by "realism." The CBS-news-team myth that irrefutable reality gets captured by flying to the scene of the coalmine cave-in is too expensive to maintain. Synchronized sound equipment is difficult to drag through swamps and over mountains in search of live subjects. Since there is "no real world to grasp beyond human practice," as McGarry has argued, independent producers should be relieved to know that they don't have to take such pains to get the real world "in the can." It makes no difference whether the work is produced by two actors in the back yard or a full crew on location — both are constructed.

The idea that Appalachia has been "invented" should be good news to scholars in Appalachian Studies as well as to fllm/videomakers in the mountains, valleys, and coal fields. Whatever work has been done toward building the idea of "region" has not been in vain. Just as folk culture has been used to maintain power relations as usual, it can be made to resist.

NOTES

1. Henry A. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. x.

2. Terence Hawks, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), Chapter 6, contains a good introduction to the science of signs which calls our attention to the vehicles of meaning. See especially, pp. 145-147 for a short introduction to the work of Jacques Derrida which suggests the significance of his thought in relation to the new position on documentary.

3. For an example of this critical position, see Claire Johnston and Paul Willeman, "Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on THE NIGHCLEANERS)," *Screen* 16, No. 4 (Winter 1975-76): 101-118; rpt. and abridged in ed. Thomas Waugh, *"Show Us Lfe": Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 192-211.

4. See Tom Waugh, "Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries," in ed. Waugh, p. xvii, for an extremely clear statement of this new theoretical position.

5. The most frequently cited passage in support of this position, particularly in reference to the woman's movement documentary, is Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in Claire Johnston, ed. *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 19.73), p. 28:

"the 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured."

6. An especially thorough discussion of the political debates around realism and modernism as they pertain to cinema can be found in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), pp. 69-82.

7. Harvey, p. 81, uses this term to elaborate certain French theories of a materialist cinema, and to distinguish them from Brechtian aesthetics. The term is originally from Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), p. 206.

8. Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (New York G.P. Putman, 1917).

9. Personal interview with Elizabeth Barrett and Herb E. Smith, Whitesburg, Kentucky, August, 1979; For further on the history of Appalshop see the editors' interview with Herb E. Smith and Helen Lewis, "Appalshop and the History of Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 11, No. 4, 1984.

10. Only one narrative fiction film has been produced at Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky, out of more than thirty shorts and features shot between 1971 and 1983.

11. Although wizened grandfathers have usually been selected over grandmothers as the subjects of these films, there are important exceptions, among them QUILTING WOMEN and NATURE'S WAY. The latter features midwife Lena Stephens delivering twins, Etta Banks cooking a healing salve on her wood-burning

stove, and Willie Westbrooks describing homemade flu and wart remedies used by blacks in the mountains.

12. *Cinéma vérité* is French documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch's translation of Kino Pravda, the newsreel series produced in the 1920s by Russian director Dziga Vertov. It has come to be associated with a very mobile style of camerawork, non-actors, long takes, and synchronous sound, which have become signifiers of "reality."

13. Bill Ferris, *American Folklore Films and Videotapes: An Index* (Memphis, Tenn: Center for Southern Folklore, 1976), p. ix, describes how these technologies made possible an increasingly "fuller record of folk voices and faces."

14. Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 240, refers to the magic of documentary, and likens the viewer's tendency to forget that cinema is a sign-system to being "spellbound."

15. Chuck Kleinhas, "Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary," in Waugh, p. 337.

16. I am indebted to Alan Lovell for this insight.

17. Gary Arnold, "Tribute to an Appalachian Mr. Chips," *The Washington Post*, 24 March, 1981, p. 32, col. 5. Arnold further praises HAND CARVED on the basis of the invisibility of its aesthetic:

"The camera is right where it belongs, the cutting crisp and astute, illustrating the self-description."

18. Most articulations of this position owe something to Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960) and the work of André Bazin. See especially *What is Cinema? Vol. I,* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967). For a good summary of the critique of realism and its implications for political documentary see E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York and London: Methuen, 1983), Chapter 10.

19. Nichols, p. 199, says that sound and image when synchronized

"...provide specificity as they root the argument in the visual and aural texture of a particular time and place."

20. Eileen McGarry. "Documentary, Realism & Women's Cinema," *Women & Film* 2, No. 7 (Summer 1975), p. 50.

21. Umberto Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic code," in ed. Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), P. 599, says,

"...even where we presume a vital spontaneity to exist, it is really swallowed up by culture, convention, system, code, and therefore, by extension, ideology. Semiology gets to work here with its own tools, translating nature into society and culture."

22. David Whisnat, *All That Is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina Press, 1984), p. 260.

23. Jameson, p. 207, suggests the possibility that because of such shifts, the "natural" could come to have radical connotations:

"...it is certainly the case that a belief in the natural world is ideological and that much of bourgeois art has worked to perpetuate such a belief, not only in its content but through the experience of its forms as well. Yet in different historical circumstances the idea of nature was once a subversive concept with a genuinely revolutionary function, and only the analysis of the concrete historical and cultural conjuncture can tell us whether, in the post-natural world of late capitalism, the categories of nature may not have acquired such a critical charge again."

24. The study guide accompanying the film adds that the toll for grinding amounted to a percentage of the grist weight — one-eighth of its weight to be exact. Walter Winebarger's father would, however, grind grain toll free for families left fatherless.

25. See Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; rpt. New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 164-165. For an elucidating discussion of Marx's understanding of how social relations are made clear or unclear to us see Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, trans. Norbert Gutterman (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 60-63.

26. Helen Lewis, "Wales and Appalachia-Coal Mining, Culture, and Conflict," *Appalachian Journal* 10, No. 4 (Summer 1983): 351.

27. Allen Batteau, "Appalachia and the Concept of Culture: A Theory of Shared Misunderstandings," *Appalachian Journal* 7, Nos. 1-2 (Autumn-Winter 1979-1980): 28; David S. Walls and Dwight B. Billings, "The Sociology of Southern Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 5, No. 1 (Autumn 1977): 131-152, provide an overview of the various models that have been used to study Appalachia.

28. Herbert G. Reid, "Appalachian Studies: Class, Culture, and Politics II", *Appalachian Journal* 9, Nos. 2-3 (Winter-Spring 1982): 143.

29. The study guide for CHAIRMAKER adds that Dewey Thompson did not change his prices from 1930 to 1970. At one time, he went around the middle man who raised the prices for his chairs, and continued to sell rockers for $5.00 and chairs for $2.25.

The Dr. John Haney Sessions. Open Secrets
Their Holocaust, upon watching ours

by Thomas Friedmann and Owen Shapiro

> "It is forbidden to make art out of the Holocaust because art takes the sting out of suffering." — theologian Michael Wyschogrod

We are writing this essay to describe and analyze audience response to two films we made on the theme of children of Holocaust survivors now living in the United States: THE DR. JOHN HANEY SESSIONS (1983) and OPEN SECRETS (1984). A novelist (child of survivors) and a filmmaker (married to a child of survivors), we have felt for some time that audiences were becoming anesthetized to the presentations of this socially relevant subject matter. We thought that the best way to revivify audiences was to demystify and demythologize the content and form of artistic texts about the Holocaust.

Because the typical documentary or fictional narrative dealing with the Holocaust tends to fix it as a historical event, we could not well resort to its form or content to depict the ongoing legacy of the Holocaust, or if you will, its ongoing trauma (including repressed feelings by the next generation). To achieve our objectives, we decided first to make our focus those members of the Holocaust generation who survived, not those who died. Second, we chose to view them through the eyes of the second generation, their now adult children.

Third, in search of filmic modes for this content, we chose in HANEY SESSIONS to destroy the expected demarcations between conventional and experimental narrative on the one hand, and documentary on the other, offering the conventionality of the paired second film, OPEN SECRETS, as dramatic contrast to the controversial form of HANEY SESSIONS. Fourth, in both films, we decided to omit all documentary elements of the Holocaust itself-that is, neither archival, newsreel footage, nor re-presentations of that footage is contained in either film, anticipating the prohibition of Claude Lanzmann (director of SHOAH, 1985), against such "souvenirs."

THE DR. JOHN HANEY SESSIONS

During the first two minutes, a wash of vertical wipes across the screen leave in its wake fragments of four faces: two men and two women. The portraits are jigsaws. Despite the continuous movement, vertical bars of the atomized frame create

disunity. The mysterious, wave like motion offers particles of human identity while four voices advance and retreat, mixed with the strains of Philip Glass' "Facades."

This opening is followed by a pause, a black screen, the film's title, a pause, black screen, two sudden flashes of white accompanied by 1000 cycle tones.

The screen then fills with the first of the full face images. For the next fifteen minutes, the four faces and voices of the opening speak of fathers and mothers — the Holocaust survivors — in the process revealing their own fears, dreams, and fantasies about the event they have sensed only second hand.

Even as they speak, witnesses to their parents' witnessing, their intercut presence receives the periodic commentary of subtitles, apparently the notes or thoughts of the therapist supervising this session.

At the film's conclusion, end-credits identify the featured speakers as children of survivors or as people married to children of survivors. The names listed do not, however, correspond to the names by which the speakers had identified themselves during the film and credit is given to a "writer" of their monologues.

AUDIENCE REACTION

The film premiered at Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, in Syracuse, New York. Though members of the general community were present, the audience was primarily Jewish. Many of them knew us or had even contributed small amounts of money to help defray the cost of production.

During our brief introduction to the film, we were careful to stress the points outlined in the opening to this article. At the film's conclusion, the audience sat in absolute silence. Once discussion began, a split became apparent — between those who were angry and those who were merely confused. A person identifying herself as a Holocaust survivor spoke first and denounced what she perceived as the "lack of feeling" expressed by these offspring on the screen toward their survivor parents. "Are these the children for whom I survived?" she asked. "If so, I'm sorry I did."

Other people (despite the introduction that had tried to focus their attention) asked how the film could claim to be about the Holocaust when it lacked the images of atrocities. "How is the world to know of the horrors if no horrors are shown, if there are no piles of violins, confiscated eyeglasses, hair, teeth, or clothing?" Others suggested that if professional actors rather than actual children of survivors had been used, the film would have more successfully elicited the audience's emotions.

Even while refreshments were being served, the arguments persisted, ironically duplicating the multiple views that had been depicted in HANEY SESSIONS. Some people defended the film enthusiastically, precisely because it avoided the expected approach. Children of survivors made particularly vociferous arguments for the authenticity of their counterparts in the film, some identifying themselves as children of survivors for the first time in public. (The local chapter of the nationwide, children of survivors therapy group gained new members as direct result of this confrontation.)

The premiere was, unquestionably, an EVENT. It was mentioned on the late night news. People talked about it obsessively afterwards. We had requests for other showings. But the feeling was unmistakable. The premiere audience was deeply unhappy and we filmmakers more than a bit taken aback by the palpable hostility.

ANALYSIS OF REACTION: SUBJECT MATTER

We would argue that the largely negative reaction cannot be glibly explained as the filmmaker's incompetence or the audience's inadequacies. The film was clearly professional and sophisticated; the audience was obviously knowledgeable about the subject matter and comfortable with its Jewish identity. Rather, the first public showing of the DR. JOHN HANEY SESSION (1983) provides a case study of the process by which an audience gives meaning to film. The specific reactions of the audience clarified for us a unique aspect of this process.

We would argue that "Holocaust" is a curiously singular subject matter, one that creates meaning at the point of reception in ways unlike any other. What is at work, we suggest, is a collective consciousness that commandeers the role of censor. Its obligation, that collective consciousness feels, is to locate on screen certain key Holocaust images, thereby making sure that the film is "authentic." Once it decides that the film "passes" this criterion, it generally settles back and rather passively accepts whatever else the film contains.

But if it feels that the film has omitted items from this small, unarticulated but delineated set, it turns wrathful, deeming the omission a desecration of the memory of the Holocaust. As "Holocaust" the word, carries within it the notions of sacred sacrifice, so "Holocaust" the subject matter has been touched with the aura of sanctity. But as deserving this matter is of sanctity, the audience, its emotions geared to be triggered by indelible images, judges texts by their inclusion of those particular images and by no other abstract notions of subject matter or artistry.

Simply put, during the showing of DR. HANEY, a "contract" between artist and audience was broken. While a breach of contract during such encounters is not in itself unusual, the vehemence of the reaction points to a number of unusual components in transactions that involve Holocaust material. For one, the contract contains extremely specific elements. Second, the audience shares in these elements collectively rather than individually. As will be made clear, THE DR. JOHN HANEY SESSIONS clearly violates the details of this special contract, as does OPEN SECRETS (1984), the second film of the "Alinsky's Children Film Project," with the result that both films have been denied inclusion in the Holocaust catalogues of all major Jewish organizations.

THE "CONTRACT"

The unwritten contract between artist and audience in every artistic endeavor is predicated on the use of artistic codes familiar to both the sender and receiver of the text. Unlike in commercial transactions, however, during an artistic exchange the artist is expected to keep his end of the bargain by not doing the expected. The audience demands that the artist take it into a "world of possibilities," not merely replicate a known or existing text. The artist is expected to provide personal, ideolectical visions. The codes the artist uses to express his/her vision allow for entry and possible decodification by the audience. Of course, the acceptance of the

artist's world by the audience may vary according to his/her manipulation of the codes and the audience's familiarity with them.

Whatever the degree of sophistication, however, of both artist and audience, the contractual obligation between them concerns parameters rather than details. Once the code has been identified, enabling entrance into the vision, details do not merely vary, but are expected to vary. At the point of complete entropy, after all, there is no poetic, artistic text. More important, although the discussion thus far has used the singular but collective term "audience" to identify the other partner in the artistic endeavor, in fact, there are many individual partners in many contracts, with each viewer, reader, or listener understanding, accepting, or rejecting different details of the code.

THE CONTRACT FOR HOLOCAUST TEXTS

We would submit, however, that Jewish audiences simply do not accept the contract on the terms described above when the subject matter under their consideration concerns the Holocaust. They come to see those films precisely because they have already identified the Holocaust as their subject matter. They bring to the viewing a vision that predates — that is a pre-text to — any artistic text. They insist that certain details of that vision be provided, regardless of what else the individual writer, poet, or filmmaker wishes to present. The attitudes and emotions these audiences wish to experience can be triggered only by images already contained in their imaginary "film." They demand that the filmmaker or author acknowledge *their* Holocaust's "code." They expect the artist to present, even within a fictional text, documentary elements — that is, archival footage from the Holocaust or its reuses/re-presentations in other films.

Neither omission nor deviation is allowed. Absence or variation of these images questions the authenticity with which the artist accesses the subject matter and confuses the clarity of meaning the audience has prescribed for itself. Victims must fall in just such a ballet; concentration camp inmates must wear just such clothing; there must be a mound of discarded glasses here and hunks of hair there.

TRANSACTIONS IN OTHER HOLOCAUST TEXTS

These specific images, words, and narrative content must appear because as far as the audience is concerned, these are the elements that inform the world. They tell those who do not know or wish to forget that "this is what happened." The need to tell the world has the force of a prime directive. All other considerations that would normally be expected of an artistic text are at best secondary, if at all significant. Thus, the TV series HOLOCAUST had merit because it educates the general audience both in the U.S. and Germany to the details of an event that that audience does not or would prefer not to know.

Questions of directorial competence, acting skills, language, style, of even verisimilitude in matters other than those directly related to the Holocaust — issues normally considered in the evaluation of artistic texts — are either not asked or are addressed only insofar as they relate to the representations to which the audience has assigned them. In fact, so great is the desire to share the larger facts of the Holocaust, that as long as the required smaller elements of unloaded cattle cars, barbed wires, shaved heads, and smoking chimneys are included, inaccuracies

in other Holocaust details are overlooked.

It matters little that a wedding dress and shotglass were unavailable to the partisan lovers about to marry in the forest, that no historical basis exists for a Jewish observer of the mass murders at Babi Yar, or that no Auschwitz inmate was likely to have retained his suitcase or prayer shawl in the barracks. Establishing the authenticity of such elements or providing poetic alterations or exclusions — considerations expected and valued in artistic constructions — become subsumed in the more important agenda: let the world know the horror of the events and let the world see the familiar images that transmit it.

The imperative of "Let the world know!" is so powerful that Jewish audiences will tolerate (if they notice at all) the subversiveness of certain texts such as Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Busch's *Invisible Mending*, which deny the Jewishness of the Holocaust or actually mock our obsession with it. Although critics rail against the profanity of such attitudes, audiences are unaware or remain largely untroubled, willing to pay the price for the dissemination of the greater "good" — the information about the enormity of the horrors. That the world learn that one form of Nazi degradation consisted of forcing mothers to choose between their children stands as more important than the suggestion in *Sophie's Choice* that somehow Nazi and Jew were kin, that Jews were just one of many victims, that the man responsible for the eventual death of Sophie, a Gentile, is Nathan, a Jew.

Because *Invisible Mending* depicts the expected elements of the Holocaust, Jewish audiences have embraced it to the extent that it was awarded the National Jewish Book Award (1985). Assured that the mass audience will "learn" about the Holocaust if it reads this book, Jewish audiences overlook falsifications about the Holocaust that represent a function of the writer's political rather than artistic agenda, falsifications it would in a different context reject totally: that the amateur "Nazi Hunters" mistake a survivor for a Nazi and that Judaism is a religion that dwells obsessively in the charnel house of the Holocaust. At issue is not the artistic merit of these works but that such merit remains unexamined and unjudged by audiences focused on searching for materials of desire regarding Holocaust information and imagery.

SURVIVORS AS DEATH SIGN

Where in other artistic texts, the audience looks for a multiplicity of semantic meanings, in works about the Holocaust it searches for just one, and in its search, it will misplace or displace all others. The presence of survivors becomes less important than the ashes of the dead. In fact, "survivor," ironically, becomes a sign whose signification has been switched from life to death. Survivors are rarely asked (and often refuse to volunteer) the details of their own triumph over death. Instead they are continually asked to affirm the authenticity of the images the audience has already internalized. The surviving father in THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK (1959) has cinematic significance only as the narrator in framing the flashback story of his dead family.

As far as the audience is concerned, his own survival (as well as those of Sol Nazerman, the title character in THE PAWNBROKER (1956) and Joe Rabin, the character played by Kirk Douglas in NBC's REMEMBRANCE OF LOVE (1982), becomes a guilt-ridden secret that the survivor himself prefers not to discuss.

Thus, in IN DARK PLACES (1981), a film about *children* of survivors, an interviewed survivor-parent typically dismisses her own survival as a miracle, an accident, a matter of chance; avoiding the details of that survival, she prefers to tell the tale of her loved ones' death. The story is moving but familiar; the words echoes of other words; the tears expected. Although genuine, the interview, as a scene in film, has become ritualistic, redundantly presented by a director to fulfill an audience's expectations rather than to depict her personal understanding or interpretation of the events.

CHILDREN OF SURVIVORS AS A SIGN

"Holocaust" consumes the survivor, its own living icon, which in turn helps overwhelm the children of survivors, the second generation. Any film about *children* of survivors is usually assumed to be about survivors who were children at the time of their survival. In fact, films about children of survivors contribute to this confusion by including the prescribed montages of the horrors. Although the works primarily intend to consider the second generation — its relationship with the surviving first generation, its understanding of the horrors, and its attempts to cope with the obligations of the legacy — they invariably de-emphasize their own unique subject matter and foreground the horrors. In KADDISH (1983), in IN DARK PLACES, and in BREAKING THE SILENCE (1984), the scenes from the death camps are not integrated with the stated purpose of the films — to understand the second generation.

The filmmakers do not ask these offspring about the effect of these familiar scenes culled from documentaries. They do not inquire how such images square with the stories the children heard from their parents. They do not wonder how effectively these filmed details substitute for the stories the parents refused to tell. Instead, they use the shots of the electrified fences, the crowded barracks, the emaciated bodies, and the smoking chimneys as extradiegetic material, outside the film's "story" about the children of survivors.

Perhaps because the filmmakers are not survivors or children of survivors themselves, perhaps because the cultural code demands it, they insert the images to establish their own qualifications, their own dedication, their own authenticity. It is their way of assuring the audience that regardless of anything else these films do, they will continue to "tell the story."

There is no attempt to make out of those images interactive elements with the children of survivors, to use the images diegetically as part of the children's story. Rather, the images remain an editorial, authorial comment. To include such scenes, in fact, sometimes causes a problem in a film about survivors themselves. One expects to see the concentration camp montage in the Yugoslavian short, LET'S REJOICE (1975). Although the film depicts the contemporary lives of survivors in an old age home, the audience accepts the shots of the Holocaust as reminders that the Holocaust remains very much a part of their lives. Yet even here the images are extradiegetic, unconnected to anything the characters say or do. All the more reason to question such scenes in films about children of survivors.

The images' inclusion replicates the pre-text: the Holocaust and the coded means by which an audience allows it to be presented. By contrast, the recent television

movie NAZI HUNTER: THE BEATE KLARSFELD STORY (ABC, 1986), uses visual documents of the horrors diegetically, as the means by which the Christian Beate is made aware of events that had taken place in Germany's past, motivating her to bring the perpetrators of those events to justice.

We can only speculate why films about the Holocaust are so sharply defined at the point of reception. Perhaps Jewish audiences take literally the insistence of Holocaust writers and theologians that art cannot be made of the Holocaust. "No poetry after Auschwitz," says the poet T.W. Adorno. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, chronicler of Auschwitz, and Nobel Prize winner concludes, "If it's a novel about Auschwitz, it is either not a novel or it is not about Auschwitz." Jewish audiences totally accept these statements that question the ability of art to present or express the enormity of the horrors; and audiences translate them into a dictum to the artist: Do not even dare try!

Another possible explanation for the commonality of the details in the audience's version of the Holocaust is that the repository of Holocaust images is not extensive, and what there is of it has been seen by millions. As a result, individuals have become truly an audience, partaking in a common vision. If, in fact, it is this commonality of source material that is responsible for the "unified field" of the audience's expectations, we might remark upon the irony: that a people accept and hallow as its icons the flickering images recorded by those who nearly succeeded in destroying it.

CONTRACT VIOLATIONS BY *HANEY SESSIONS*

Whatever the reason for the unique nature of the Holocaust "contract," it is one that we violated by THE DR. JOHN HANEY SESSIONS (and by OPEN SECRETS) in a myriad number of ways. With both films, the errors were of commission as well as omission. Not only did HANEY SESSIONS fail to provide the expected icons, it also insisted on presenting stories about the children themselves. When it told stories of the Holocaust, it told stories of survival not of destruction, denying the audience even the verbal equivalents of its icons that SHOAH — a film that shuns images of destruction — still provides. "Everyone in my family survived," begins one speaker in HANEY SESSIONS. "Parents, aunts, uncles. At family bar-mitzvahs we even had a cousin's table, just like the American kids."

The presence of these speakers testifies to life, not death. The stories they tell of parents contain only occasionally details of debasement, and those are presented as stories heard not as events directly experienced. At no point do the children of the survivors attempt to re-create the details of the Holocaust. Rather they tell of them from the distance, as the indirect participants they were years after the memories of the events forced themselves upon them. And, of course, whatever the horrors, these are tales that end "happily" in the parents' survival.

But the Jewish audiences who have viewed the film refused to separate the stories of the living survivors from the tales of the dead they had expected to hear. They have confused, in the words of Alan Berger, educational consultant to the films, "the dead with death." The legacy of the Holocaust, our films say, is to remember the dead but not to deny life in that commemoration. In these films, audiences do not see the expected images of death, and the voices they hear insist on the persistence of life, no matter how bitter. Doubly angered, they refuse the

distinction between death and the dead and reject this sense of the Holocaust.

They are particularly outraged when one of the children of survivors seems to be telling "Holocaust jokes." Audiences remain so determined to check off items in the text that actualize the list of horrors contained in their imaginary pre-text., that they do not realize that the character is quoting, that he is attempting to cope in his own way with the awful legacy of the Holocaust that has been transmitted to him by his parents. Instead, audiences mistakenly identify with the "outsider," the unaware therapist, who exclaims, via subtitles, "Sarcastic SOB."

Yet the "jokes" have been culled from survivors, eager to testify to the existence of gallows humor in ghettos and camps, and as such, these "jokes" constitute authentic or archival documentation of the Holocaust. But as these "jokes" and their telling are not in the imaginary pre-text, they become rejected by audiences and deemed sacrilegious.

THE "PRIVILEGED" POSITION

All of us involved in the Minsky Project are actual children of survivors or are married to them. The Holocaust stories we heard were family stories. They were our bedside tales. If our parents had preferred silence on the subject, in an attempt to protect us from the horrors, they would have cut us off from family history. For us, the archival materials of death were not the only images. Our parents could testify to the ongoing triumph of life, whereas for the typical Jewish audience, the Holocaust is death at a particular historical moment. But because the endless repetition of those flickering black and white images constitutes the only reality of the Holocaust for these audiences, they perceive the personal stories of the survivors as aberrations, incapable of evoking the horrors.

When we embarked on the project, we were aware of the need to overcome the established codes that prescribed how the subject matter of the Holocaust is to be approached. We did not realize then the full extent to which this prescription seeks to deny to the children of survivors and to the next generation the freedom to formulate its own expressions of the ongoing trauma and contemporary relevance of the Holocaust.

We did not realize that audiences would not understand "legacy" in our terms, that they are uninterested in the contemporary issues raised by the Holocaust, that they would resist attempts, in Annette Insdorf's words, "to penetrate history and create art," settling instead for "merely recording events." As far as these audiences were concerned, being children of survivors compounded our sins. In refusing to portray our parents as heroes, we erred as children and failed again as the offspring of survivors. Audiences cared little about the normal ambiguities — even repressed hostility — contained in any parent-child relationship, finding resentment even where the characters expressed none. They preferred survivors to be larger than life or at the least, that any weaknesses on their part not be revealed to "those who cannot understand."

As children and as filmmakers, we tried to delineate real people; audiences preferred symbols. Our defense was that the reality of relationships aside, children of survivors often talk about their parents' refusal to accept an heroic or saintly designation, but this defense was unacceptable. Nor could we persuade these

audiences that in insisting on the luck or extraordinariness of all survivors, they were denying the survivors' individuality and perhaps even risking their humanity. Given the unrealistic build up, could not the existence of just one cowardly moment or just one selfish act negate the image?

Unaware of this, we allowed ambivalence — what one viewer called "lack of feeling" — to be heard in the voices of HANEY SESSIONS. We let the portraits emerge from the words of the offspring, who might themselves not realize the stature of the people who had raised them and often sheltered the children from the details of the Holocaust. We wanted these survivors to be seen as we their children first saw them — as flesh and blood parents. We wanted to establish their specificity as people, as fathers and mothers involved in the minutia of everyday life. We wanted the audience to fathom, as these children had, the mystery of the survivors' existence, the meaning of their presence, the aspect of their character or fortune that enabled them to survive and reaffirm life by having children.

But to audiences familiar with the details of the Holocaust, mysteries of this type stand as anathema. The audience wanted closure to the questions we had provided, but no answers were forthcoming from the HANEY therapy sessions. Like the trauma of the Holocaust, the second generation's attempts to understand are ongoing, intertwined with the ordinary details of daily life. But for Jewish audiences, the meaning of the Holocaust remains contained in the familiar imagery of the concentration camp dead, imagery whose sharp edges have been dulled by repetition, removing the sting of suffering Wsychogrod had thought only "documents" capable of providing.

For us, the irony lies in the success of HANEY SESSIONS with non-Jewish audiences, who perceive the content and form of the film as analogical to an unimaginable event. Without the interference of cultural consciousness that insists on documentary replication, they access the warning of the opening sequence that no documentary is forthcoming. They sense that the liquid chaos of the opening two minutes denies genre expectation. The progressive, asymmetrical framing of the intercut monologues and the interrupting flashes and beeps fragment any attempts at "portraiture" and prevent audiences from perceiving the image as a whole. This becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of presenting the Holocaust in any unproblematic manner that could result in closure.

The audience understands the film as an attempt by non-witnesses to understand the enormity of the Holocaust. They see in the subtitles their own "outsider" point of view. They seem not to demand more length, more content, more of the sheer monumentality that SHOAR, for example, supplies. They prefer their pain exquisite, rather than long, But they receive, above all, they receive, contradicting the most frequent criticism the film has received from Jewish audiences, namely, "We understand what is going on, but will *they*?"

OPEN SECRETS

Taking into consideration this last criticism, we vowed to script and film OPEN SECRETS, the second short in the Alinsky's Children Film Project, as a fairly straightforward, dramatic narrative. While certainly structuring some deep levels of discourse, we would essentially tell a story in a compassionate manner, reserving for our personal statement the creation of new icons — icons of the Holocaust that

belong to the 1980s. We had thought of HANEY SESSIONS as a film about the portrait as symbol, with the fragmented faces of the children becoming the icons for the Holocaust legacy. In OPEN SECRETS we searched for objects, for items, for what poets call "thingness," accessible to any engaged viewer.

OPEN SECRETS begins aboard a city school bus where Elli Alinsky, a ten year old Orthodox Jewish boy, overhears several jokes about Jews which he does not quite understand but which he senses are anti-Semitic.

After credits roll, Elli is shown at home, being greeted by his mother. Elli subdues his effervescence quickly in response to his mother's somber mood. During snack he tries unsuccessfully to have the jokes explained to him. As evening comes, he reacts to his mother's lighting of a candle that commemorates departed members of her family by inquiring more directly about the deaths and indirectly, about his parents' own experiences. The mother attempts to explain by taking him to her bedroom and leafing with him through a half empty family photo album.

Unsatisfied, Elli waits for his father's return. When Elli demands answers from his father, he is taken to the dining room table and is taught from the Talmud a cautionary tale about the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. Elli cannot accept his father's argument that for some questions no answers are available.

He later eavesdrops on his parents, but is unable to penetrate their enigmatic conversation. Perhaps realizing that he will himself have to find answers, he wakes in the middle of the night and taking books from a cabinet, begins to read about the Holocaust.

The story thus ends as the child "awakens" to the Holocaust, but we did not emphasize the word and avoided showing its familiar images. The form is somewhat like a "prequel," used effectively by the Hungarian film THE REVOLT OF JOB (1984), which narrates the story of peasant Jews from the fall of 1943 to the spring of 1944, when they were rounded up and deported to concentration camps. The audience sees no violence or horror, but, fully aware of the victims' eventual fate, imagines it, making its actual rendering unnecessary. THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI CONTIMS (1970) succeeds for much the same reason. The "trick' with OPEN SECRETS, of course, was to tell a 1980s, story, and eschewing the familiar icons, create ones that will contain the power to evoke the Holocaust.

AN INVESTIGATION OF ICONOGRAPHY

We decided to avoid even oral versions of the familiar icons in OPEN SECRETS. The parents, survivors of the camps, discuss neither the camps nor their own survival, either among themselves or with their son. This design is also consistent, of course, with the reality experienced by most children of survivors, who don't always learn of the Holocaust from their parents. To demonstrate that this avoidance is deliberate rather than arising out of a general lack of communication, we made each encounter among various family members warm and loving.

The setting, we hoped, would also become emblematic of the Holocaust legacy. By placing the characters in an Orthodox or observant home, we intended to create a world whose subtle idiosyncrasies would charge the text with multiple connotations. We gave each of the three characters his/ her own space, color, and

lighting. The boy occupied the yellow-walled breakfast room, a central meeting area for the whole family, where meals were eaten and homework done. The blue-green bedroom, containing the photo album and its few fragile relics of her past, was the mother's. The father — in Hebrew, Abba — ruled the formal dining room, where, in a warm glow of brown, all serious learning and discussion took place.

We wanted to imbue these culturally identified domestic spaces with new meanings that relate to the Jewish content of the story as well as to the Holocaust. The child's curiosity about the hidden past, the mother's desire for familial continuity, and the father's unshakable faith in his religious and historical heritage would impose new meanings upon these domestic spaces, generating connotations other than "informality," "sex," and "formality." Assigning each a space to which others proceed only by invitation would suggest, we hoped, both the discreteness and secretiveness of the knowledge which the adults possess, yet will not reveal, as well as the deceptive openness or availability of that information. The family is never seen in the same frame throughout the film, another way of using space to say that the Holocaust legacy cannot be conveyed to others and even if recounted, can never be understood. Closure or unity on the Holocaust is unattainable.

Additionally, we gave the father a desk that was declared off-limits to both the son (Eli), and to the mother (in Hebrew, Eema). When, in his search for answers, the boy opens the desk and finds old photos, he (and the audience) sees only domestic, prewar scenes. The audience, knowledgeable about the fate of the people depicted in the photos, learns something about the father's secret; the boy, looking for unambiguous revelation, remains mystified. Are those photos less effective icons for the Holocaust for not containing charred bodies? Do not the empty spaces they leave in the mother's tattered photo album signify the discontinued history and severed family that is so much part of the Holocaust legacy? And even if the mother knew of the existence of these photos and could place them within those pages, would the empty spaces be filled?

ICONS TO METAPHORS

Our compulsive quest for new icons for the Holocaust legacy demanded yet more metaphoric and metynomic events, each revolving around an object of Jewish signification. Every Orthodox male must keep his head covered. The boy, Eli, wears a traditional skullcap or *yarmulkah*, but he dons above it a New York Yankees baseball cap. He keeps the Law but also hides his adherence and with it, his Jewish identity. Keeping secrets is a skill he learned at home. We also tried to transform the signification of the *Yahrzeit lecht*, a twenty-four hour candle burned to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's death. Though there are no religious strictures limiting its use for other purposes, there are accepted codes regarding its lighting time, placement, and visibility. It is used in the film as a light source for an otherwise dark image, as Eli's play object, and in its final representation, as the light by which Eli begins to read about the Holocaust, removing several books on the subject from a glass cabinet.

The cabinet itself was planned as an icon whose semantic meaning resides along the oppositional axis of "visible/ unattainable," as was a Hebrew calendar, with certain days marked on pages that have already been flipped away from sight. The "open" yet "secret" dichotomy remains in the narrative as well. The mother leafs through the family album, showing every photograph yet providing no

explanations. The father explains completely the pages from the Talmud dealing with the destruction of the ancient Temple at Jerusalem yet ends with the "explanation" that there are no answers. The boy does not hear clearly the anti-Semitic jokes that open the film, yet understands fully their meaning.

And when the mother and father stand together in the darkened bedroom, the outside light slanting through the window recreating the stifling space and prison bars of the camps, they do speak of their experiences. But she speaks of the time before the horrors actually began and he of his inability to comprehend their enormity. Further, they speak in language so poetic, so metaphoric, that the sophisticated audience understands only a little more than the eavesdropping Eli.

For us, these were to be the icons of the Holocaust legacy — these oblique, these elliptical, these clear but transparent bits of information that are disquieting, disturbing, ultimately frightening, yet always ineffable. This is how the non-witnessing generation's attempts to grasp the Holocaust would be represented.

AUDIENCE REACTION TO *OPEN SECRETS*

What we did create was a film that was apparently too understated, its icons too unfamiliar and therefore too obtuse. Jewish audiences like it, but treated it as a pleasant story of an Orthodox boy and his family. They generally managed to figure out that the parents were Holocaust survivors but never realized that the Holocaust legacy was central to the film because the film lacked the proper images (the eyeglasses, the hair, the crematoria, the tattooed arms) as well as the extended length that a weighty subject such as the Holocaust somehow demands.

Those who understood the film's interest in the contemporary legacy of the Holocaust and its focus on the *survivors* suggested to us that although they were privy to our intentions, no "other," i.e. non-Jewish audience, would likely realize this, because the film lacked the proper identification (the tearful survivor, the guilt-ridden offspring, the stories of brutality and death), did not have the documentary format that seems proper for such investigations, and simply did not provide the cathartic experience for which audiences had come prepared.

OTHER FILMS ABOUT CHILDREN OF SURVIVORS

That response apparently has not occurred with other films dealing with the second generation. They are documentaries, whereas the films in the Alinsky Project are dramatic narratives. Their hour or longer running time is more than twice that of either HANEY SESSIONS or OPEN SECRETS. They employ the expected re-presentations of the Holocaust. Intentionally or not, they do contain some icons beyond the bodies and the ashes. Most notable would be the composition of family scenes around dining room tables filled with plates and plates of food, a reminder by contrast of the starvation in the camps. The setting for an interview with another family, among whose members disclosure is intermittent, is the living room, the glass coffee table in front of the daughter and parents austere, bare of all but a few tall-stemmed roses.

In BREAKING THE SILENCE, a child of survivors is interviewed in the bucolic surroundings of a college campus, but slightly behind him is an abstract sculpture, all emaciated, elongated lines. But these interesting attempts at new iconography

become overwhelmed by the documentary footage that punctuates and hence directs these films. The images provide what philosophers call "emotive words," terms that trigger non-rational responses, making reasonable dialogue impossible.

THE "MEGA-THEME" THAT IS "HOLOCAUST"

As long as such literal re-presentations stand as the analogies for the Holocaust, the literary or filmic metaphors of films such as HANEY SESSIONS and OPEN SECRETS remain simply too unfamiliar to endear themselves to Jewish audiences.

Audiences take so seriously the dictum, "No poetry after Auschwitz," that they do not permit any attempt to make poetry out of the *legacy* of Auschwitz either. Yet writers on film and the Holocaust recognize the need for new forms, new narrative strategies, new cinematic styles if the subject matter is to continue to transform contemporary consciousness.

Because our films deal with survivors and their relationship with the second generation, because the films avoid both the images and oral descriptions of the horrors, because they do not fit easily into either a fictional or a documentary form, and because they utilize both metaphoric language and new iconography, these films rarely intersect with the films Jewish audiences desire.

But our films have forced these audiences to confront their Holocaust pre-text. Leaving theatres after other Holocaust films, Jewish audiences have little comment. "What is there to say?" they ask. They do not realize that such films neither commemorate the dead nor foster a legacy for future generations because they allow an audience to discard its emotions with its empty bags of popcorn. But HANEY SESSIONS and OPEN SECRETS, by refusing to re-create endlessly the familiar images, prevent recurring but programmed catharses. Instead these films generate an intense and prolonged discussion at each showing.

This approach may have kept from us the affection of our audiences but may have succeeded in capturing their attention despite the dictates of what the Argentinian philosopher Pedro Cuperman calls this unarticulated but powerful "mega-theme" that is "Holocaust."

DISTRIBUTION

Film Distributor: Alinsky's Childrens Film Project, 103 Crawford Ave., Syracuse, NY, 13224. (315) 445-0692.

Special Bulletin
Transfictional disavowal

by Tijani El-Miskin

Edward Zwick's March 20, 1983, NBC television film, SPECIAL BULLETIN, contained so much overwhelming nuclear horror that the screen had to be frequently labeled with disavowals of factuality. The label informed viewers that the film was a dramatization and not reality. Despite the frequency of its appearance, I myself remember resisting the temptation to assume the label brought a weather report, perhaps a storm warning. The show was constantly interrupted by commercials, a supplementary disclaimer to convey the impression along with the label that the show was indeed a "dramatization." Far from it.

The commercial advertisements could not really help the NBC television network disavow the factuality of SPECIAL BULLETIN. Various programs — news bulletins, the Olympic games, cultural and educational programs that are supposed to edify the audience, interviews with heads of state on important matters — all become trivialized with commercial triteness. The audience knows this fact, has assimilated it, and takes it for granted. Therefore interrupting SPECIAL BULLETIN with commercials did not enhance its fictionality.

Faced with the force of the subject matter and style of the presentation, the word "dramatization" as a visual label did not totally dispel fears of possible reality. In fact, concerned viewers seemed to have disbelieved the network's label proclaiming the film's fictionality and regarded the label itself as another fiction. After the show NBC received thousands of phone calls to find out if the nuclear disaster depicted in SPECIAL BULLETIN was real.

To an audience that had barely recovered from a real story of the nuclear fall-out in Three Mile Island, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (or more accurately an audience that may never completely recover from the emotional horror of it, since the contractors who built the reactor found it too expensive to clean up their mess), the frequent appearance of the label "dramatization" may not suffice as consolation. After all, this is an age when anything (nuclear or conventional) may happen any time. Have the computers of this push button system not given quite a few false alarms of imminent Soviet attack, including one in the summer of 1980? Indeed, under such circumstances, the public's nuclear paranoia does not represent psychological panic but a healthy attitude.

President Ronald Reagan, during whose administration U.S. audiences watched SPECIAL BULLETIN, assimilated militaristic bellicosity even into his jokes (namely the one about wiping out rival nations from the face of the earth) less than two years after SPECIAL BULLETIN was shown.[1][open notes in new window] Both the memorial horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and reckless nuclear possibilities are too immediate to be drowned by the screen disavowals. The audience had to react and phone NBC.

What really moved the concerned audience to phone the television network to separate fact from fiction was the film's technique and mode of expression. When we see newscasters as opposed to western cowboy actors, for example, on the television screen, we expect a "real" story: Peter Jennings or Dan Rather giving evening news on ABC and CBS, Ed Bradley reporting on "Sixty Minutes," Ted Koppel in the "Nightline" program that started with the so-called Hostage Crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, McNeil and Lehrer giving their reports on PBS, etc.

It is with this television convention in mind that SPECIAL BULLETIN's audience watches the film. The title itself imitates the procedure used in the above-mentioned programs. In the film, itself, the viewers face a group of newscasters giving minute by minute reports, taking "us" to the scene of the disaster and right into the nuclear ship captured by guerrillas. To transpose the conventions of journalism into the world of fictional television makes the audience ask NBC for an explanation. The power of the convention overwhelmed the disavowals that constantly appeared on the screen. Its power transcends even traditional documentary film's authority or that of epic cinematography. This transposition is what I call transfictional disavowal.

Transfictional disavowal has become established in literature. When we see a character called John Barth in John Barth's 1979 novel, *Letters*, for example, this challenges our earlier concept of the novel genre as a work of fiction detached from its writer; we find the name of someone we regard as this novel's detached author among its characters. And we are not quite allowed by convention to regard John Barth as, for example, a disciple of Dante, whom we find by name in *The Divine Comedy*. We consider John Barth a U.S. writer, writing after some limited novelistic convention has been established. He writes years after Cervantes, Richardson, Fielding. We will hardly forget these factors, although we have been warned by the Soviet author of the *Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin, who discussed the continuous nature of the novel's evolution. Transfictional disavowal, namely that the text refuses any distinction between the world of the author's person and that of his novel, makes *Letters'* readers feel uneasy at the sight of a character called John Barth in John Barth's novel, *Letters*.

In SPECIAL BULLETIN, the equivalent of the character in Letters called John Barth is the television convention of disseminating news bulletins. We see transfictional disavowal in NBC television network's transposing the news bulletin convention into a fictional convention. No number of attempts by NBC through labels to separate the two conventions work for the viewer who is armed with the convention's daily-reinforced power, stronger than one continuous label below the screen. If we were in a movie theater, our anxiety about the "reality" of SPECIAL BULLETIN would be alleviated perhaps by walking out of a movie theater (a "fiction" house?). This would feel different from leaving the dinner table after being

"informed" by a news bulletin, broadcast over television and told to us by Dan Rather or Peter Jennings.

To take another example, Peter Watkins' film, WARGAMES presents the horrors of nuclear war, using conventions similar to SPECIAL BULLETIN. Peter Watkins' film also relies on the newsreel technique, taking viewers from scene to scene. But strictly speaking, WARGAMES does not fall within our frame of analysis of transfictional disavowal. (It would have had it been seen by the audience Watkins made it for — British television BBC refused to show it.)

The viewer of WARGAMES knows s/he is watching a film in a movie theater, which does not share television's prestige of formally disseminating news bulletins. Conventional movie theaters show feature fictions. News bulletins, presidential addresses, etc., do not reach the public through the medium of the movie theater. Even if the movie screens were labeled with the words "true story," viewers of Watkins' WARGAMES would be skeptical about the film's factuality just as the many viewers of SPECIAL BULLETIN were skeptical of the film's fictionality, despite the label "dramatization."

Take it further. A movie theater's information agents (or officials) tell the viewers, "Please don't smoke in the theater," "Please don't speak too loudly," "We have drinks outside if you need them," etc. Even if these agents informed viewers that what they saw on the screen was true, the agents' voice conventionally only interprets the theater's policy and does not have authority about the movie's "facticity." Since television convention includes offering live coverage of events, television has the potential of convincing the viewer that what s/he is watching is really happening now, that the president, for example, is giving a press conference right now. Movie theaters do not have that kind of convincing control over information discourse.

As a medium, television has a separate function from that of the movie theater. On the other hand, in terms of information dissemination, radio has functions similar to television, including its method of live coverage. As a point of comparison we may cite one of the most striking instances of transfictional disavowal in the history of U.S. radio broadcasts. It is Orson Welles' October 30, 1938, broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, based on H.G. Wells science fiction novel of the same title.[2] The broadcast described an imaginary attack on the planet Earth by invaders from Mars. Like Stephen Spielberg's 1982 movie about visitors from another planet, EXTRA TERRESTRIAL (E.T.), Orson Welles' broadcast was also set on a Halloween night. The ironic implication of the event taking place on a night of national jest did not lead the frightened listeners into separating conventions: they did panic and asked if it were a real invasion.

Many of *War of the Worlds*' approximately 12 million listeners (a figure based on the 1930 census, American Institute of Public Opinion survey six weeks after the broadcast, and Hadley Cantril's research) who heard the Sunday night (8:00 p.m. Eastern Time) Orson Welles' broadcast knew that it was Welles speaking. If some did not, they were told at the beginning of the broadcast by the announcer, but they had to have tuned in on time:

>"The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the air in *War of the Worlds*

by H.G. Wells. (Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars*, 1940).[3]

The announcer added further "Ladies and gentlemen: the director of the Mercury Theatre and star of these broadcasts, Orson Welles..." All the signs of fictional formalities were observed by the announcer, such as mentioning the name of Orson Welles, clearly not a newscaster, and appealing to a famous science fiction writer, H.G. Wells' name, evoking the name of the Mercury Theatre, and mentioning fiction-related words like "star," words not associated with news bulletins. This bracketing of fictional conventions did not lull the audience into a sense of fantasy. Not even the four spoken reminders from the beginning of the broadcast to the end achieved that purpose.[4] The operation of transfictional disavowal should force them to demand a separation of fact and fiction.

Of course, not every listener would be frightened into believing the invasion was real. Some may have known the fictional story. Others may have had other dispositions. But the impact of manipulating the resources of one convention so as to mingle it with other conventions had a concrete effect. Needless to say, the director Edward Zwick was fully aware of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* (see *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1983). Indeed even the name SPECIAL BULLETIN appears to have been taken from Wells' 1938 broadcast's manipulation of "factual" radio conventions. Very early in the beginning of Wells' broadcast, the announcer, as part of the fictional "drama," informed the listeners that the station would "bring you the music of Ramon Raquelo and his orchestra." As the music started playing, the following interruption was made by a second announcer

> "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program of dance and music to bring you a special bulletin from the intercontinental Radio News. At twenty minutes before eight, central time, professor Farrel of the Mount Jennings Observatory, Chicago, Illinois, reports observing several explosions of incandescent gas, occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars. The Spectroscope indicates the gas moving towards the earth with enormous velocity" (Cantril, pp. 56).

With this intense manipulation of media convention through transfictional disavowal, the music continues, underlining the illusion that it had been interrupted only because of the special bulletin. The announcer again interrupts to announce in a news bulletin that the government Meteorological Bureau requested the large observatories of the country to "keep an astronomical watch on any further disturbances occurring on the planet Mars." The story of the explosions are also confirmed by a Canadian professor; another professor from New Jersey says he hardly knows how to paint for the listeners "a word picture of the strange scene before my eyes, like something out of a modern Arabian Nights," and he goes on to describe the impact of the explosion on earth. Later in the broadcast the announcer even tells the listeners that

> "I am speaking from the roof of Broadcasting Building New York City. The bells you hear are ringing to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians approach. Estimated in the last two hours three million people have moved out along the roads to the north, Hutchison river Parkway still kept over for motor traffic...No more defenses. Our army wiped out...artillery, air force, everything wiped out. This may be the last broadcast" (Cantril, p. 36).

At the end of the fictional broadcast, an attempt was made to reassure the listeners:

> "This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character to assure
> you that the *War of the Worlds* has no further significance than as the
> holiday offering it was intended to be...We annihilated the world before
> your very ears, and utterly destroyed the Columbia Broadcasting
> System. You will be relieved, I hope, to learn that we didn't mean it, and
> that both institutions are still open for business...If your doorbell rings
> and nobody's there, that was no Martian...It's Halloween" (Cantril, pp.
> 42-43).

Despite several intense disavowals of factuality, over one million of the estimated
nearly two million listeners who took the broadcast as a news bulletin became
publicly excited by it. Cantril reports,

> "Accounts of frantic telephone calls flooding switchboards of radio
> stations, newspapers and police stations are confirmed by figures
> secured from American Telephone Company. An increase of 39 per cent
> was reported in the telephone volume in Metropolitan New Jersey
> during the hour of the broadcast as compared with the usual volume of
> that hour of the evening" (p. 60).

He adds, "Three quarters of the station managers reported that mail volume
exceeded 100 per cent of the normal number of letters received." In many cases the
increases were over 500% (p. 60). What mattered for the frightened listeners was
not whether the radio as part of the mass media could broadcast fictitious events.
They knew that. But they trusted the radio as a medium where they received
ordinary news bulletins and special bulletins about serious events, including any
possible reports of the "invasion of the earth by Martians" (which they would not
learn about in a movie theater, for example). When a television or radio fiction uses
a highly developed exploration of transfictional disavowal, listeners are at the
mercy of the media.

NBC presented some thirty-one messages proclaiming the fictionality of SPECIAL
BULLETIN. In Charleston, South Carolina, the scene of the fictional nuclear
disaster, the word "fiction" was permanently superimposed on a corner of the
screen. This did not spare the Charleston NBC station from receiving hundreds of
mostly negative phone calls. The Humanitas-Prize-winning SPECIAL BULLETIN,
co-produced by Zwick and Marshall Herskowitz, and based on a story they jointly
authored, was made on video.

The story revolves around a group of anti-nuclear protestors taking hostages,
including a television cameraman. They enter into Charleston harbor with a
tugboat called "Liberty May." They have a nuclear device that they threaten to
explode unless the U.S. government hands over to them the Charleston-based
detonating modules of some 968 nuclear warheads. They want to deactivate them
as a first step towards unilateral nuclear disarmament. To cover the 36-hour crisis,
they also obtain live coverage from a (fictitious) television network RBS, where two
co-anchors Ed Flanders and Kathryn Walker cover the event with field reporters on
the scene. Government commandos attempt to end the crisis by force. The attempt
leads to catastrophe as the homemade device of the hostage holders goes off and

destroys Charleston.

One of the film's basic assumptions is that "urban terrorism" can result in nuclear disaster. This assumption, of course, contradicts humanity's nuclear memory: the potential sources of nuclear confrontation are colonialism, imperialism, unbridled cold war, the escalation of arms build-up, and super-power rivalry. Our nuclear memory goes to the second world war, the Korean war (during which the U.S. President was said to have considered using nuclear weapons against the Chinese to end the war), the declaration of nuclear emergency by the U.S. during the 1973 Middle Eastern crisis, and other instances that are covered up by SPECIAL BULLETIN so as to project misleading scapegoats. The film presents anti-nuclear activists as potential nuclear terrorists rather than search for the real sources of nuclear confrontation. In that, the film is militaristic and avoids the crucial issue of disarmament. Instead, what matters for the producers of SPECIAL BULLETIN is not to promote peace through the mass media. They manipulate TV's potential for scaring people through mixing conventions, its potential for transfictional disavowal, so as to make a profit.

They exploit social fears, in spite of the lessons of Welles' radio program and the controversy within NBC that almost led to the show's cancellation. NBC showed the film, but not without hesitation. According to the NBC's news president, Reuven Frank,

> "The only concern of NBC news was that SPECIAL BULLETIN might have been confused with a news bulletin. We agreed on various steps to ensure that the average viewer will not be misled in that way."[5]

The "various steps" include the 31 disclaimers, including those in the body of the show. And the director objected to these.[6] The disclaimers themselves did not work. Discourse conventions shaped the show's reception. Certain discourse are socially assigned to certain media of expression. The "entertainment" and "fictional" discourses are assigned primarily to Hollywood and to TV genres.[7] Television, in addition to engaging in discourses of "fiction" "entertainment," also can conduct "factual," "information," discourses.

Refusing to separate the two conventions overpowers the disavowal that tells us unconvincingly that SPECIAL BULLETIN is only a "dramatization."[6] It is essentially the transposition of two different conventions by the process of transfictional disavowal that moved the listeners and viewers of WAR OF THE WORLDS and SPECIAL BULLETIN (who are implicitly or explicitly educated about these conventions) to search for a distinction between fact and fiction. The social effect of transposing these different conventions underscores their vulnerability to manipulation.

NOTES

1. President Reagan's bellicose "jests" were made on Saturday, August 11, 1984 during a microphone test for his weekly radio broadcast to the nation. The statement reads as follows: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed a legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." See *New York Times*, Thursday, August 16, 1984, p. 4.

2. H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897.

3. Perhaps the most important detailed contemporaneous account of this Welles' broadcast based on Howard Koch's free adaptation of H.G. Wells novel is Hadley Cantril's 1940 book, *The Invasion From Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*. New York: Harper and Row, 1940; 1966. The book contains a complete script of the Orson Welles broadcast and detailed interviews with some 135 people, most of whom were known to have been frightened by the broadcast. He started the interviews one week after the broadcast and completed it in about three weeks. The book's general theoretical framework, as Cantril acknowledges (p. xvi), is an elaboration of the systematic outline in Muzafer Sherif's *Psychology of Social Norms*. It should perhaps be added that the panic caused by the Orson Welles broadcast was also recreated in a television movie called THE NIGHT THAT PANICKED AMERICA, (*Washington Post*, March 20, 1983, p. L1).

4. The following announcement was made three times in the course of the broadcast:

"For those listeners who turned in to Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre on the air broadcast from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. eastern standard time tonight and did not realize that the program was merely a modernized adaptation of H.G. Welles' famous novel *War of the Worlds*, we are repeating the fact which was made clear four times on the program, that, while the names of some American cities were used, as in all novels and dramatizations, the entire story and all of its incidents were fictitious." (Ibid, pp. 43-44).

5. Quoted by Howard Rosenberg, "NBC: A House Divided Over SPECIAL BULLETIN," *Los Angeles Times*. (March 18, 1983, Friday), p. 1. For a "critical" assessment of Frank's position consider the comment that

> "if NBC news president Reuven Frank and executive vice president Tom Pettit hate the show — and Pettit has been particularly vociferous on the subject within network ranks — it may be partly because network news has been aped so cleverly and accurately by a couple of guys from Hollywood, and also perhaps because the producers and their craftsmen came up with a better set for their anchors than NBC has been able to do over the years in umpty-ump expensive attempts." (see Tom Shales, "Bulletin: The Show that Shook NBC," *Washington Post*, Friday March 20, 1983, p. L10).

Shales may be right about the profit-making rivalry between NBC and Hollywood. And the film may have been a countermeasure to compete with the then-forthcoming ABC television film about nuclear catastrophe, THE DAY AFTER [see Howard Rosenberg, "*Special Bulletin*: TV Terror," *Los Angeles Times* (Monday, January 31, 1983), p. 8, Part VII. But the other implication is about exploiting public fears to make profits. The issue of corporation jealousy should not overshadow the crucial question of accountability to a public that is at the networks' mercy for both ordinary and special bulletins. Shales' argument virtually pushes for the show's presentation. But what about the potential of exploiting millions of ordinary viewers who do not control the networks?

6. Edward Zwick was quoted to have remarked,

"I won't be any part of that...I have absolutely no interest in scaring anybody, and I applaud the disclaimers, but not in the body of the drama." [see Howard Rosenberg, "NBC: A House Divided Over SPECIAL BULLETIN," op. cit., p. 1, Part VI.]

7. For distantly related disavowalist perspectives in U.S. popular culture consider the May 31, 1983 series of the ABC soap opera, MARY HARTMAN, the heroine of the same name gets so engrossed in watching a soap opera that she characterizes as "insensitive to human feelings," a visitor who tries to talk to her without being interested in the program. The visitor, Sergeant Foley, retorts, "Mary, this is a soap opera," at which point Mary wakes up from confusing life with soap opera. When television goes out of its way to promote such a confusion, it then becomes a problem of transfictional disavowal. Incidentally, that same evening ABC had shown another soap opera HART TO HART in which Jennifer, as a favor to her former college teacher who is now a famous romance writer, has to impersonate his female nom de plume to accept a book award he had won. This drama of authorial disavowal, presenting a successful author whose literary success may be ruined by a simple disclosure of his real identity — the man behind the *nom de plume* — underscores the multifarious disavowalist perspectives in the media.

8. The label also represents an interference by NBC to save its role as a partial monopolizer of "factual" discourse like news, presidential addresses, etc. The network cannot, of course, try to save this role by restricting commercial advertisements. The corporations sponsoring such advertisements collectively control the networks, which financially maintain themselves through advertisement earnings.

Theories of the news

by Mariko Tomita and Carl Bybee

INTRODUCTION

Item One:

Soon the *Los Angeles Times* will publish a new section called "Corporate News." No, this will not have more news about corporations. Corporations will write the news about themselves and about anything else they want to comment on. It will only look like the *Los Angeles Times*' news format.

Such a statement used to be called a press release. Corporations issue press releases to impose the corporation's own point of view on an event. However, press releases are chancy, because the media might not run them or might edit out the corporate view. "Corporate News" will provide corporations a sure thing, because the corporation will pay for the space to run the release exactly as they have written it.

Item Two:

We read about Item One in the April 23, 1988, edition of the *Wall Street Journal*. About five years ago a study published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* revealed that almost 50% of all the news in the *Wall Street Journal*, news that the paper presented as news, had been initiated by a press release. In fact, often times the *Wall Street Journal* would print a story with a staff reporter's byline over a word-for-word copy of a press release — making the press release appear as staff had gathered the news.

Item Three:

By 1960, local newspaper competition had disappeared from 97% of U.S. cities.

Item Four:

In 1981 Ben Bagthkian calculated, in his book, *The Media Monopoly*, that forty-six corporations controlled the majority of all major U.S. media. In his 1987 edition he calculates that this concentration has accelerated to the point where now only 29 corporations control the majority of major U.S. media.

Item Five:

Last year CBS News unveiled a new promotional campaign. In advertisements, they'll try to sell viewers on their news' accuracy and credibility.

OBJECTIVITY

The items could go on and on. But what does it mean? Our argument is this: For the last fifty years the concept of objectivity has performed a Herculean task — to make it seem reasonable that the media institutions promote free speech at the same time that they try to maximize economic profits. That is, the news media's commitment to objectivity has served as the force field separating news work from money making. In addition, the news media have used "objectivity" to shield them from the influence of the state and other sources of power.

However, as these items indicate, U.S. journalism is approaching a state of crisis. The commoditization of news has become more intense, and that commoditization has precipitated a legitimacy crisis. The news media sell news. If news more and more resembles advertising, the news media have nothing left to sell. And if the news no longer has the guise of objectivity, then corporate U.S.A. would lose its mystified front for presenting its version of reality as all reality. Increasingly people recognize that neither the force field nor the shield ever existed.

The time is ripe to rethink the meaning of news. In fact, the news media have never been objective. Objectivity is impossible. Only a naive theory can interpret news as striving for objective, unbiased accounts of socially important events. Such a theory would cover up the degree to which news reality is a shaped reality — not always directly or intentionally, not always simply — but shaped to privilege the views of the powers that be.

The theory of news presented in journalism textbooks, sold to as by institutions of corporate journalism, and romanticized in news films like BROADCAST NEWS, FRONT PAGE, and ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN must be critically reassessed. We must look at news within the larger context of how knowledge is produced and distributed. This discussion proposes a critical theory of news. Here we wish to focus on how journalistic practice constructs a kind of knowledge which supports and sustains the hegemonic ideology of international capitalism.

In a second installment of this article, forthcoming in JUMP CUT, we will apply this critical theory of news to the special case of international news. The news' manipulative power rests in its ability to recast events in common sense terms, that is, in terms of the hegemonic or dominant view.

In this way, news about the U.S. economy gets told from a point of view, which, for example, assumes that Japan has an unfair trade advantage. The management crisis in U.S. industry and the internationalization of capitalism are not mentioned or if mentioned, not explored in stories about "imports." Such major economic structures, looked at on an international scale, never get presented as the backdrop against which news is framed. Instead, hegemonic assumptions about the decline in certain U.S. industries create a point of view while the assumptions remain mostly hidden. We have chosen foreign news for a representative critical textual analysis because the very unavailability of first hand knowledge about other

cultures makes readers and viewers particularly susceptible to these kinds of implicit constructions as they watch "international" news.

We will make our argument for a critical theory of news in three parts. First we will lay a conceptual groundwork by briefly reviewing several theories of power, which provide the context for a critical theory of news. Then we will briefly examine the relationship between theories of power and theories of mass communication. Finally we will present the special case of news within a larger critical theory of mass communication.

THEORIES OF POWER

A one-dimensional view of power focuses on the visible exercise of power. It implies that power is wielded in a sportsmanlike way. Nothing under the table. If you don't want toxic wastes dumped in your backyard, form a neighborhood organization and lobby your city council, the state and/or the federal government. Toxic Waste Inc. can do the same. The conflict becomes open and clear with a definite point of visible contention.

This notion of power has close ties to a pluralist theory of society — the dominant theory of society in our education system, and the dominant myth about how our society works that is woven into presidential speeches, television sit-coms, corporate advertising, and the evening news. Political sociologist Albert Szymanski has summed up that position this way:

> "Pluralism, although it stresses the group rather than the individual, argues that the state in capitalist society is authentically democratic since 1) the state's policies derive from interaction among society's constituent groups, to which all people belong; 2) the groups are internally democratic, or at least as "voluntary associations" they accurately reflect their members' interests and concerns; and 3) the balance among these forces, reflected in state policy, essentially represents a fair and true equilibrium among all the various interest groups, with no great consistent bias in any direction." (1978, p. 4)

Steven Lukes (1974) discusses a three-dimensional theory of power, which corrects such a Pollyanna view. To the one-dimensional view of power, Lukes adds a second dimension, which recognizes that power often has a hidden face. Power also gets exercised by leaders' doing nothing or by misdirecting public attention. A citizens' group acting to challenge a toxic waste dump may find that they run into a seemingly endless chain of hearings and postponements requiring them to write and rewrite reports, file and refile petitions. They may find that the legal system has a structural bias which passively operates against them. Their resources dwindle, so they give up. Or they may give up because they later think that fighting drug abuse in their community is a more important problem.

While this view comes closer to describing power relationships as we experience them, Lukes proceeds to argue that the two-dimensional view still misses a complete understanding of power. It still just focuses on actual observable conflict. In the third dimension of power analyzed by Lukes (strongly influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci), he emphasizes that the most effective and most dangerous use of power is to prevent conflict from appearing in the first place. If

leaders can convince people that toxic wastes are good for them, or at least for their employment, or if general social assumptions convince people that their unemployment, lack of health insurance, etc. reveal their personal failure rather than social failure, conflict disappears or at least becomes displaced.

A complete definition of power must incorporate this third dimension, which requires an understanding of the ways in which consciousness is shaped. Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of ideological hegemony to explain the process. Stuart Hall has recently revitalized the concept:

> "This operates, not because the dominant classes can prescribe and proscribe, in detail, the mental content of the lives of subordinate classes (they too 'live' in their own ideologies), but because they strive and to a degree succeed in framing all competing definitions of reality within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought. They set the limits — mental and structural — within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them" (1979, p. 333).

The three-dimensional view of power becomes, then, not just a more comprehensive explanation of power's meaning and processes, it also critiques pluralist theory grounded on a simplistic one or two dimensional view. This will have substantial implications as we reconsider the meaning of news.

THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND THEORIES OF SOCIETY

For the last 40 years, the pluralistic view of power and society has dominated U.S. mass media research, directing research and assimilating competing perspectives within its explanatory boundaries. For instance, the pluralistic perspective has assumed that the media are for the most part independent institutions. The media, they say, sometimes act as a special interest group in its own behalf. And the media sometimes serve as government watchdogs — making sure government acts impartially and on behalf of the general public. They also function as a public forum where conflicts of interests between competing interest groups can be argued in an orderly and gentlemanly fashion.

These assumptions have led to a scholarly research agenda which implicitly accepts the limited notion of power built into the pluralistic perspective. Pluralists ask questions like these — does violent television content lead to violent behavior in society, did the New York Times devote the same number of column inches to the Bush campaign as it did to the Dukakis campaign, or should freedom of speech rights be extended to corporations?

Researchers often merely probed the surface level of social interaction, the only level pluralist researchers could look at, given their assumptions about power. Such research found that the media, not surprisingly, had little or no effect on audiences. In addition the media seemed relatively passive in terms of exercising what the pluralists call power. In fact, the pluralists had to conclude that the media's primary role was to reinforce existing social cohesiveness.

In the last decade, supporters of a critical theory of society and the media have

launched a direct assault against the pluralist paradigm. In many ways, an attack wasn't even necessary, since the paradigm had started to crumble on its own accord. The 1969s had provided little evidence for the social stability which pluralism assumed existed. The '70s economic crises further indicated instability. The question posed by the real U.S. experience of these two decades was not the pluralist hallucination of what makes our country work so well, but what sleight of hand stops our country from being torn apart?

Pluralist media researchers were ready to reconsider their position. They had statistically researched themselves into a corner from which they had to conclude that the media had no effect — when all around them the media were being charged and credited with getting the United States into and out of the Vietnam War, bringing Nixon to his knees, stimulating terrorism, launching a sexual revolution, catapulting an aging movie star into the White House, etc.

The scholarly attack on pluralism came from at least two fronts. The first front was from inside. George Gerbner and his students at the Annenberg School of Communications were pushing a culturalist view of the media to try to expand current thinking about mass media's effects. Their work resulted in a body of literature about the role of the mass media in constructing our images of social reality. They suggested a dramatic and powerful role for the media in politics and social life.

The other front was based in Europe. Fifty years ago members of the Frankfurt School, first in Germany and later as expatriates in the United States, began articulating a critical theory of society based on their economic analysis of developing capitalism. This theoretical tradition recognizes the role ideology plays in social control. It was not widely recognized for years in the United States, having been beaten into the margins of academic discourse by the gleaming blades of pluralistic empiricism.

As pluralism continued to fail as a theory and as empiricism continued to reveal its limitations in explaining the dynamics of complex social processes, the tradition of the Frankfurt School was rediscovered. In this context, by 1984, the dominant communications organization in the United States, the International Communication Association, set the theme for its annual conference as "Paradigm Dialogues," featuring debates between the pluralistic and critical perspectives.

The critical view distinguishes itself from the pluralistic perspective in five key ways. First, critical theory recognizes the unequal distribution of wealth and power in society and over systems of communication. Second, critical theory is concerned with the "processes of legitimation through which the prevailing structures of advantage and inequality are presented as natural and inevitable" (Golding and Murdock, 1978, p. 353). Third, it does not regard media as autonomous institutions. Fourth, critical research looks "less for direct behavioral effects of media and more for how meaning is created in specific historical contexts" (Real, 1984, p. 78). Fifth, critical research argues that all research is guided by personal commitment. It views the classical positivist ideal of a value-free pursuit of science as a mystification of how knowledge is constructed. Michael Real sums up the critical perspective:

"Critical communication research examines public communication in

reference to economic and political forces and the exercise of power, with attention given to social, historical and ideological contexts. Political-economic dominance and epistemological issues are frequent concerns of critical theory" (1986, p. 460).

The study of power must include not only visible decision-making processes and non-decisions, but also the ideological exercise of power. The ideological exercise of power, in Lukes' terms, comes through "shaping perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they [social agents] accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or image no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained or beneficial" (p. 24). This rediscovery of ideology forces us to reconsider the role of news in contemporary society. News is not a passive transmittal of information but a key site of struggle over the production of meaning.

THEORIES OF NEWS

1. THE DOMINANT VIEW

The dominant view of journalistic practice in the United States is less of a theory than the accumulation of one hundred years of rationalization for the commercialized production of news. It tautologically defines journalism as the institutionalized process of news gathering and reporting. But what is news gathering and reporting? Emery and Emery, authors of one of the classic texts on journalism's history, answer with what sounds like a plot line from a Grade B movie: Journalism is

> "the story of man's long struggle to communicate freely with his fellow men — to dig out and interpret news, and to freely offer intelligent opinion in the marketplace of ideas" (1972, p. iii).

Contained in this definition of journalism are several interrelated, unexamined assumptions about the relation between journalism as a site of meaning production and of power (Bybee and Hacker, 1988). The first is that the press functions, or could function, independently of other social, economic and political institutions.

The concept of an independent press remains a necessary myth to sustain the belief in and acceptance of U.S. society as a pluralistic democracy, composed of competing interest groups vying for state favors. An independent press provides a guarantee not only that citizens have the necessary information to alert them to the need for action, but also that there exits a publicly accessible forum for the orderly debate of important issues. Systematic studies and experience have challenged this assumption. It has endured, however, because the shortcomings of the actual working press are simply used as arguments for the glory of an ideal independent press. The shortcomings are never interpreted as the inevitable outcome of the current system.

The second assumption in the dominant view is that communication primarily represents a problem of transporting information from a source to a receiver. Information, what are called "facts" in journalism, is treated as discrete bits of empirically observable reality which can be precisely cut from their setting, iced, thawed and re-experienced with only marginal losses in meaning. This assumption

has been challenged, often from within the pluralistic camp. Pluralistic researchers have recognized that a reporter's attitude, the hidden agenda of a news source, and/or the structure of the news gathering process can influence a fact's accuracy. Academic journals and popular magazines contain many such studies. The code word became "bias." Sure, bias exists in the news, but it is an index of the degree to which the news deviates from reporting the truth. The key here is that the dominant view assumes truth EXISTS. This is the third assumption of the dominant view.

The third assumption is closely related to the first two. Contemporary U.S. journalism is grounded in the philosophy of logical positivism. There is a reality and it exists out there. Our job is to observe and record it as accurately as our senses and our instruments of observation allow. Achieving objectivity becomes primarily a technical problem. And presumably we can separate truth from values.

Pluralistic research has met the challenges to the first two assumptions of hegemonic journalistic practice by ignoring their deeper implications. It cannot meet a challenge posed to the third assumption. The increasingly incestuous relationship between news and money, knowledge and power, challenges this assumption at the level of many people's experience. To recognize explicitly the third dimension of power is to pose a challenge at the level of both personal understanding and theory. Critical theory deals with news in its role in producing social reality.

2. THE CRITICAL VIEW

Critical theorists who adopt the three-dimensional view of power perceive news as ideologically active. In contrast with the view developed by pluralists that media have limited effects, critical theorists recognize the active role of media in society and see news as an ideologically encoded frame, rather than as a mirror of reality. Gaye Tuchman argues that "news is perpetually defining and redefining, constituting and reconstituting social phenomena" (1978, p. 184). According to the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG),

> "News is never simply a series of facts or a simple mirror of external reality. Rather, it is a cultural product and the accounts and descriptions of the world which it gives are produced from within specific interpretative frameworks" (1980, p. 3).

The critical point of view challenges the notion of social responsibility in which news provides a marketplace of ideas and objective reports of important issues. For example, the GUMG argues that

> "it (news) constantly maintains and supports a cultural framework within which viewpoints favourable to the status quo are given preferred and privileged readings" (p. 122).

This agrees with Tuchman's argument that "news, with the web of facticity, legitimates the status quo" (p. 13). Tuchman further defines news more concretely as

> "an ideology, which is a means not to know: a means to obfuscate and

so to legitimate the intertwining of political and corporate activity" (p. 14).

Herbert Gans states more specifically that "news supports the social order of public, business and professional, upper-middle-class, middle-aged, and white male sectors of society" (1979, p. 61). Furthermore, he argues that "new news is also generally supportive of government and a variety of other national institutions, including the quality universities" (p. 61).

Thus, theorists who are critical of the pluralistic view of media perceive news as reconstructing social experience to support existing social values and order. For example, Herbert Altschull states that "broadcasting outlets give capitalist ideologues a tool of incalculable power to promote and expand support for the prevailing belief system" (1984, p. 135). He analyzes news media in terms of commercial imperatives.

Critical theory recognizes that the active ideological production of meaning through news can be intentional (instrumental) as well as unintentional (structural). It is often intentional, as Michael Parenti identifies. He states that "along with owners and advertisers, political rulers exercise a substantial influence over what becomes news" (1986, p. 228). He claims that news is also "conscious deliberate misrepresentation" (p. 219), or "disinformation" (p. 222). According to him, "Disinformation implies that false and fabricated evidence has been disseminated" (p. 222). This contention separates him from other critical theorists owing to his stress on the "conscious" distortion of news (intentionality).

Other theorists stress the structural conditions of ideological production. They argue for the importance of an unconscious aspect within the encoding process. The framing of news does not necessarily result from a conscious and conspiratorial process. Rather, it often comes from an unconscious process based on people's assumptions about life, rooted in their social conditions and backgrounds.

For example, according to Stuart Hall,

> "Statements may be unconsciously drawing on the ideological frameworks and classifying schemes of society and reproducing them without those making them being aware of so doing" (1982, p. 7).

Alvin Gouldner comments that "news is defined against the tacit background of unspoken premises, and by the bench marks these provide" (1976 cited in GUMG, p. 402). The GUMG is empirically substantiating Gouldner's theoretical point:

> "Ideologies are the connecting link between the socalled 'facts' of the news and the background assumptions which enable us, the audience to understand those 'facts" (p. 402).

The GUMG study provides an excellent example of this critical approach. The GUMG examined the mechanisms of ideological encoding in industrial-news reporting by BBC and the ITN. They analyzed industrial news coverage during the first four months of 1975, and found in this news coverage, ideological imbalance against the working class as well as ideological support for government and

management.

Their study is important, not only because it has revealed that television news coverage was not as "balanced," "neutral" and "impartial" as it claimed to be but also because it goes beyond the discovery of bias to the identification of the mechanisms of ideological production. Their study detected that

> "there are significant absences in the vocabulary of industrial news reporting which, along with the vocabulary which is used, reveal selectivity and value preference for a particular view of the causes and nature of industrial conflict" (1984, p. 66).

However, they do not suggest that television news simply and directly shows the ruling-class view, but that in subtle and complicated ways, it finds the dominant view credible, trustworthy, and preferable. Furthermore,

> "there is an attempt to reduce the plurality of meanings inherent in any social conflict to a set of simple formulae or frames of reference which are at base an ideological defense of the legitimacy of the status quo" (p. 124).

Similarly, Hall argues that particular accounts may be ideological,

> "not because of the manifest bias or distortions of their surface content but because they were generated out of, or were transformations based on a limited ideological matrix or set" (p. 72).

Robert Hackett explains that limited ideological matrix" as

> "a set of rules and concepts for making sense of the world which is systematically limited by its social and historical context" (p. 263).

Thus, critical theorists increasingly draw upon conceptions of ideology to explain news making. According to Hackett, this

> "broadens and even contradicts the view that news messages are biased in accordance with the motivations of communicators" (p. 260).

The concept of "ideology," within the critical camp, is "moving away from a concept of a superstructure hanging over an economic base, towards a view of ideology as a constitutive elements in the relations of production, and in their reproduction" (Hackett, p. 261). This reconceptualization of ideology parallels Raymond Williams' theoretical framework, which again draws on Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony."

> "In the version of Marxist theory inaugurated by Antonio Gramsci (1971), *hegemony* is the name given to a ruling class domination through ideology, through the shaping of popular consent. More recently, Raymond Williams (1973, 1977) has transcended the classical Marxist base-superstructure dichotomy (in which the 'material base' of 'forces and relations of production' 'gives rise' to the ideological 'superstructure'). Williams has proposed a notion of hegemony as 'not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology', but 'a whole body of

practices and expectations' which "constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society" (Gitlin, pp. 9-10).

Todd Gitlin has adopted Williams' theoretical framework and has proposed that

> "the notion of hegemony...is an active one: hegemony operating through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures. Hegemony is done by the dominant and collaborated in by the dominated" (p. 10).

Tying this notion to the function of mass media in capitalist societies, Gitlin writes:

> "In liberal capitalist societies, no institution is devoid of hegemonic functions...But it is the cultural industry as a whole, along with the education system, that most coherently specializes in the production, relaying, and regearing of hegemonic ideology" (p. 254)

He continues that

> "hegemony operates effectively — it does deliver the news — yet outside consciousness; it is exercised by self-conceived professionals working with a great deal of autonomy within institutions that proclaim the neutral goal of informing the public" (pp. 257-58).

Yet, the news frame is not neutral and impartial, because it is bounded by the hegemonic ideology in society and the dominant class interests inside and outside the media organization. Therefore, the critical theorists do not see the media as independent, autonomous organizations in society. Rather, they see the organizations deeply intertwined with other institutions in society. Within its limited autonomy, the news plays an active role in society in shaping audience's perceptions about reality, consciously and unconsciously reaffirming hegemonic ideology of society and legitimating the status quo. However, it is important to keep in mind that the dominant ideology is not static and that there is always the possibility left for challenging it by a counter-ideology.

As explained above, the pluralistic approach interprets news from a one-dimensional view of power and focuses on observable conflict in the encoding process. Moreover, it assumes objectivity is possible. Therefore, you should see manifest bias when you see the distortions of news.

Within the pluralistic perspective, it is impossible to explain the following question: What makes consistent partial explanations of social phenomena in news coverage possible without the news' losing its credibility among audiences? If news consistently reinforced a particular point of view intentionally, the media would quickly lose credibility. However, most audiences regard news as credible. Since critical theorists view news as consistently presenting a certain interpretation of reality, they try to find an answer to this question by drawing on the notion of ideology.

The framing of news is not necessarily a conscious process. Rather, it is often an unconscious process based on routine practices and people's assumptions. Their limited ideological framework, which stems from their social backgrounds and tacit

assumptions about life, works within the hegemonic ideology. Hegemonic ideology is experienced by members of a society as if it were common sense or culture. Therefore, power holders, media practitioners and audiences do not necessarily realize its existence.

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Introduction
Chinese cinema

by Gina Marchetti

In JUMP CUT, No. 31, we presented a special section of current scholarship on film in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This section offers several articles which take up and expand on some of the issues dealt with in that issue. [That issue is still available for $3.00 ($3.50 in Canada and abroad).]

Several factors have led to the present availability of materials on Chinese film. Since Nixon visited the PRC in 1972, official U.S. relations with China have grown warmer. As a result, filmmakers like Xie Jin have had the opportunity to visit the U.S. and scholars like Tani Barlow, Don Lowe, George Semsel, Chris Berry, and myself have had the chance to go to China. Film exchanges have become more frequent, and PRC films pop up more and more often in both U.S. and European festivals.

Concurrently with this increase in scholarly and artistic exchanges, Chinese film production, since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, has also steadily grown. Therefore, there are more films to be seen and analyzed. And these current films stand in marked contrast to those produced by earlier generations of Chinese filmmakers. Ambiguous, provocative, and clearly influenced by Western modernism, films by the so-called "Fifth Generation" of Chinese filmmakers (e.g., Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, etc.) have captured awards and critical attention internationally.

Perhaps because of this new visibility of current films and filmmakers, there seems also to be an increased interest in the history of Chinese film. Much of this historical work is of particular interest to Marxist film scholars. A great deal of Chinese filmmaking in the 1930s and 1940s features the cinematic expression of Chinese critical realism, a type of left aesthetic perhaps best known in the West through the writings of Lu Xun. In his article, "Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures? — The 1930s Leftist Cinema in China and Cross-Cultural Criticism," Chris Berry discusses the political controversy surrounding these films after Liberation in 1949 and attempts to place them historically, culturally, as well as politically within the broader framework of international oppositional cinema practices.

Although early Soviet film and Marxist filmmaking in Latin America as well as

other parts of the Third World have received quite a bit of attention from film scholars, post-1949 revolutionary Chinese film has gotten very little critical attention, with the exception of Jay Leyda's *Dianying* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972) and the occasional article, until very recently. The period between 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 saw the development of a uniquely Chinese socialist film aesthetic combining Soviet, U.S., European, as well as Asian cinematic influences in an attempt to represent the Revolution to the Chinese populus. To anyone interested in oppositional and revolutionary film practices, the case of early PRC filmmaking raises vitally important ideas regarding socialist realism and the nature of radical film form, the representation of gender within Marxist film practices, the nature of popular political filmmaking, among other issues.

In order to better understand this era, the career of the director Xie Jin provides an interesting case in point. Beginning filmmaking in the 1950s, Xie Jin, who is still very active today, has contributed to every stage of the development of film art in the People's Republic. My article on Xie's TWO STAGE SISTERS situates that film within the director's overall oeuvre as well as within the history of Chinese film. Da Huo'er's interview with Xie Jin highlights the tremendous political and cultural changes Xie has witnessed.

Still controversial today, Xie un links the pre- and post-Cultural Revolution eras. Although always interested in marrying the melodrama with political content, Xie Jin's films have changed dramatically from his pre-1966 tales of women finding personal liberation through revolutionary struggle to his recent work which has been critical of Party policy during the Anti-Rightist campaign of the 1950s (LEGEND OF TIANYAN MOUNTAIN) and the Cultural Revolution (HYBISCUS TOWN). He has also made the virulently patriotic and openly nationalistic GARLANDS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN. However, today, Xie Jin is not criticized for the political content of his work, but, rather, for his use of melodrama, for exaggerating emotions, and using character types which some critics have seen as "Confucian" in their unambiguous devotion to traditional virtues. In other words, Xie is condemned for being "old-fashioned," for not being modern.[1][open notes in new window]

This controversy surrounding Xie Jin and the changes in his work as well as the provocative nature of the young Fifth Generation filmmakers' projects actually point to far broader transformations within Chinese politics, art, culture, and everyday life. Even twelve years after the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectual circles still reel from the turmoil of that period and the letdown from the euphoria of Maoist idealism and the purposefulness of Mao's continuing revolution. Artists and intellectuals have attempted to fill this vacuum with a fascination with all things Western from technology and private enterprise to modernist art, a flirtation with both traditional and imported religions, an interest in Chinese history, as well as a call for Chinese nationalism above Party loyalty. In this period of ideological crisis, film opens up an avenue for a better understanding of the way a post-revolutionary society deals with sweeping social, political, and cultural changes.

In addition to Da Huoer's interview with Xie Jin, George Semsel's interview with Teng Wenji provides some valuable insights into the current state of Chinese film

production as well as intellectual and artistic life. Taken from Semsel's book, *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic* (NY: Praeger, 1987), this interview shows the changes which have taken place in the Chinese film industry over the last few years through the career of one of the PRC's more controversial directors.

Perhaps the most telling piece on current conditions in the PRC, however, is Tani Barlow and Donald Lowe's article on the media. In 1981 and 1982, Barlow and Lowe taught English language and U.S. culture at Shanghai Teacher's College. There, they were able to observe the rapid changes taking place in Chinese mass media as well as their students' responses to these changes. This excerpt from their book, *Teaching China's Lost Generation: Foreign Experts in the People's Republic of China* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, Inc., 1987), shows the way in which the Chinese media audience is adapting to and reworking cultural influences from the West.

To many, who may have been moved by the vehemence of the Red Guards marching in Tiananmen Square in the late-1960s or Mao's swimming the Yangtse River, China today may pose a problem. With Maoist idealism gone and the pragmaticism of Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" on the current agenda, is China still a socialist culture? Does the study of contemporary Chinese film offer anything to ongoing Marxist film scholarship? Certainly, as in the past, Chinese filmmakers are still wrestling with the issue of their own identity and looking for what it means to be a Chinese filmmaker in a world dominated by Hollywood and a socialist filmmaker at a time of sweeping social and political changes. To those of us outside of China committed to social change and oppositional media work, we can only learn from this search.

NOTES

1. Pie Kairui, "Confucianist or Realist? — The Xie Jin Debate," *China Screen*, No. 1, 1987, p. 12.

A note on romanization of Chinese: Over the years, scholars and linguists have used several methods of transcribing Chinese into the Roman alphabet. The Wade-Giles system (still used in Taiwan) remains the best know. However, *pinyin,* used in the People's Republic, is gradually replacing it. In addition, many commonly used names for people and places (e.g., Canton) really do not fit into either system because they bear little or no relation to the Mandarin pronunciation. Canton becomes Guangzhou in *pinyin*. In this special section, we've left Romanization to the authors' discretion. Most use *pinyin*, while sometimes preferring other renderings for more commonly used names and places and peple (e.g., Mao Tse-Tung for Mao Zedong, Peking for Beijing). We hope this doesn't create confusion for the reader. Please note that sometimes the same film appears with several slightly different titles (e.g., WREATHS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN or GARLANDS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN).

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Chinese left cinema in the 1930s
Poisonous weeds or national treasures

by Chris Berry

The leftist films of the thirties may seem an arbitrary point at which to begin the critical examination of Chinese cinema. However, what I want to do here is demonstrate that the leftist films of the thirties are a very appropriate place to begin dealing with this relatively new critical object. My argument is based on the idea that these films constitute objects within two overlapping discourses, one Chinese and one Western. I would like to introduce the Chinese discourse below. The Western discourse that overlaps with it is that concerning the "third cinema," as it has been termed, and the politico-aesthetic standards derived from it.

I believe Chinese leftist films of the thirties may be usefully studied in relation to the third cinema, and so enter into Western critical discourse. However, at the same time it is also my hope that the overlapping character of the two discourses might allow them to be conceptually interlinked and mutually informing. In this way, a consideration of thirties leftist film may serve as an entry point to Chinese cinema that is reconcilable to the political demands of cross-cultural criticism.

It is these questions of cross-cultural criticism that face us most immediately in our consideration of Chinese film. There can be little doubt that the Chinese cinema is now established as a new object for our critical attention. With major film retrospectives in Paris, London, Turin and Pesaro as well as the distribution of many new films in the United States, the problem is no longer one of getting people to look at Chinese films. The question now is how we should look at them, how we should analyze them, and how we should integrate them into our critical discourses.

The fate of other non-Western cinemas provides plenty of examples of what to avoid, but little positive direction. All too often the films and filmmakers have been appropriated for deployment in already established Western discourses, with only superficial attention paid to their place in their original cultures. Japanese film provides an excellent example of these tendencies and illustrates these problems of cross-cultural criticism.

Two major lines of appropriation can be readily identified in Western criticism of Japanese films. One is the Hollywood aesthetic of Anderson and Richie, the other the modernist critique of their position by Noel Burch.[1][open notes in new

[window] His references to Anderson and Richie correctly represent their work as employing an aesthetic that values films emulating the codes of classical Hollywood realism, and in particular the post-war Japanese cinema.[2]

However, Burch is equally guilty of applying an entirely Western aesthetic to the consideration of Japanese film, although his standards are antithetical to those of Anderson and Rithie. Completely in keeping with the left modernist tradition that collapses political and "formal" radicalism, Burch sees all the characteristics of prewar Japanese cinema branded as "errors" and "faults" by Anderson and Richie as marks of a systematic challenge to the Hollywood codes. In this way, Ozu's use of 360-degree space and "pillow shots" elevate him to comparison with Eisenstein and Brecht for Burch, even though there is nothing in his work that unambiguously suggests any comparable concern with radical politics as well as formal originality. [3]

Both these critical tendencies figure Japanese film in terms of an already constituted network of Western critical discourses. One, approving of mainstream Western culture, is assimilation 1st. The other, preferring the challenge of alternatives, sees pre-war Japanese film as exotic, a desirable model for Western filmmakers to work toward. Placing the films in their cultural context, which Anderson and Richie and Burch make some attempt to do, does not help much. When this is done, the tendencies already noted are simply extended to the whole of Japanese culture.

 For example, when Richie notes the frequent use of the camera at the eye-level of someone sitting on a tatami mat in a book on Ozu, I presume we are supposed to read this as one of the characteristics making him "the most Japanese of all their directors."[4] Here the exoticist tendency seems to be at work. Would a shot with the camera at standing height be Western, or non-Japanese? Does Japan only exist in terms of its difference from the West?

What is missing from these pieces on Japanese film is any consideration of what film means to the Japanese themselves, or, to be more precise, what it means to various Japanese social groups and how it relates to their own various understandings of what Japan is. In the politics of criticism, the deployment of a non-Western culture only as a mark of difference by which the West may come to identify itself is an unequal, one might even suggest neo-colonialist, operation.

Of course, it is not possible nor is it my intention to suggest that Western analysis or viewpoints should be repressed and erased in work done by Western scholars. That would be idealist in theory and unrealizable in practice. However, it might be both less exploitative and more enriching if Western discourses could be developed that acknowledge and examine the self-perceptions of non-Western cultures, and that are also produced in relation to that knowledge. This move might be started by examining discourses on film produced in the cultures under consideration, a fairly basic procedure entirely lacking in the work on Japanese film I have just discussed.

Indeed, it is only by examining Chinese film criticism that we can perform the necessary preliminary step of understanding the relation between the films made available to us by the Chinese authorities and Chinese cinematic output as a whole. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), for example, only films produced in that period were exported, and the thirties films were banned along with

everything else. As a result, many Westerners still think of strident "revolutionary" epics as the typical Chinese feature film, although they are in fact far from being representative of the whole. Since the fall of the "Gang of Four" in 1976 the tables have been turned. Now it is the pre-Cultural Revolution films that are back in distribution, and the Cultural Revolution films that have disappeared. The leftist films of the thirties have been featured very strongly indeed in the new range of films made available for foreign retrospectives.

However, there is no reason to presume that these films are a great deal more representative of Chinese film as a whole than the Cultural Revolution diet, and this is especially the case with the leftist films of the thirties. In fact, representativeness has never been a criterion in the selection of films for export. It is false to apply the post-*Screen* scholarly community's hopes and expectations for representative samples suitable for a quasi-scientific methodology.

Rather, the Chinese have sought in each different period to select the "best" of their output for foreign viewers. They have operated on aesthetic grounds. However, these aesthetic grounds are also shifting and not immediately accessible to Westerners. They are neither our almost forgotten standards of the fifties nor a Chinese equivalent also based on essentialist concepts of beauty. Rather, the various positions that have led to cinematic canons such as those referred to above constitute a politicized aesthetic field. The leftist films of the thirties have formed a central issue in that field since the founding of the People's Republic.

It is tempting to understand the fierceness of the arguments around the films of the thirties, and indeed around pre1949 films in general, in terms of a displacement. According to this perspective, all film production since the rise to power of the Communist Party in 1949 and the nationalization of the film studios in the early fifties has been necessarily good until proven otherwise. Only in exceptional circumstances might one risk being negative about a new film, and even then caution and hesitation would be the order of the day, because the critic would of course bear in mind that such a film had passed by censors at every point in its production and been approved by them for release.

Negative assessments of pre-1949 films, on the other hand, would be less dangerous, and so a tendency to displacement by historical allegory in critical work might be generated. Certainly historical allegory is a rhetorical technique with a long pedigree in China. And there are also elements of truth in the ideas that political expectations for pre-1949 films do not run so high, and that the arguments around them are directly connected with current issues.

However, these two factors do not add up to an allegorical discourse. Allegory would require that there be no connection between the thirties films and those of the People's Republic. In fact, many of the people associated with the earlier films were also active in the cinema of post-1949 China. What is at stake, then, is the relation between the earlier and later films, and, by way of this debate, the careers of filmmakers in China. Are these leftist films of the thirties heritage or heresy?

The pre-liberation Chinese cinema was located in the Eastern coastal cities, primarily Shanghai, and was producing for a market in which the vast majority of films shown were imported, mostly from Hollywood. The film-going audience was urban, upscale and attracted by the cosmopolitan, modern and Western

connotations of the medium. All film production and screenings were, and long had been, subject to the censorship of the KMT nationalist government.

In these circumstances, most Chinese production was imitative of Hollywood, and, at least on any referentially explicit level, apolitical. Drawing room comedies set among the new Chinese bourgeoisie and Chinese musicals made up a large part of the overall production. However, in the 1930s Japanese attacks on China increased in both frequency and severity. In response at least partly to this, various socially conscious dramatists and other concerned culture workers gathered together and formed the League of Left-Wing Writers. They moved into the film world, and made their presence felt in a group of films very unlike those produced before. They represented contemporary social problems and participated in the growing call for national unity in the face of Japanese attacks at a time when Chiang Kai-Shek was still following a conciliationist line with the Japanese.

The above description is a ridiculously condensed outline derived from Cheng Jihua's *History of the Development of Chinese Film*.[5] The first two volumes of this massive and ongoing project cover the years up to the founding of the People's Republic, and were published in 1963. It is the only book of its kind in China and therefore stands as the de facto official Chinese film history. This position has drawn attention to the book and encouraged controversy in many areas, including Cheng's stand on thirties film.

He continues from the above material to argue that the leftist filmmakers were operating under the guidance and inspiration of the Communist Party's directives on culture and propaganda, and that the resulting films were in accord with the policies of the time. On this basis, the leftist films of the thirties are figured as a part of the cinematic heritage of the People's Republic, and the forerunners of its own cinema.

It is important to understand that Cheng's statements here constitute an argument, not a statement of the obvious. It cannot be taken for granted that such a close relation existed between these filmmakers and the Party either during the thirties or during the early sixties, at which time this book was published and many of them were still very prominent in the film industry.

As Paul Clark has pointed out, although the Chinese Communist Party recognized that the cinema was one of the most efficient ways to reach the people, it was the medium with which it was least acquainted when it came to power in 1949.[6] After the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937 and the invasion of Shanghai most of the leftist filmmakers lived out the war years in Hong Kong, the foreign concessions of Shanghai prior to their occupation, or else in areas controlled either by the KMT or by the Japanese. Very few of them were able to join up with the Party in its retreat from the interior where it was already based in the early thirties to the mountain fastness of Yenan, where it survived the war years in incredibly tough circumstances until 1945.

Filmmaking in Yenan was almost impossible, and the Party turned more to traditional Chinese art forms, for example developing a strong movement in traveling drama troupes which spread the message entertainingly and along the lines of the familiar traveling opera troupe. In accordance with these straitened circumstances, an aesthetic developed which placed value on the simple, the wholly

Chinese, the truly peasant and worker-based, and on obedience to the Party by culture workers.

Mao developed this view in his famous *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*.[7] The cosmopolitan, middle-class, Westernized east coast cities where the filmmakers came from and where they continued to operate can be seen as almost the exact opposite of this Yenan aesthetic. This separation helped to engender a series of tensions and even disagreements after 1949, all detailed in Clark's study.

In these circumstances, Cheng's assertion of a close relationship between Party and filmmakers in the thirties despite their geographical separation had a double implication for the film world in 1963. Within a general framework of affirming cooperation and harmony between the film world and the Party, Cheng's work can be read as calling upon the film industry to be loyal to the Party and its requirements, and as calling upon the Party to trust film workers as loyal and committed followers of the Party line. As we all know, this striving for consensus was overturned and replaced with the purist policies of the Cultural Revolution very soon after Cheng's book was published.

The elements that came to power during the Cultural Revolution are now dubbed "ultra-leftists. In the cultural sphere they espoused a neo-Yenan aesthetic that was strict and unforgiving. As I have indicated, very few filmmakers had the sort of class and political background that might have saved them from the attentions of the Red Guards and their backers. The studios were purged and the vast majority of their workers were sent to the countryside. So little of the existing talent was found to be acceptable that very few films were made during the Cultural Revolution decade.

The film workers from the thirties were among those criticized most heavily. Mao's *Yenan Talks of 1941* were interpreted as a repudiation of all that had gone before them. Even the leftist films of the thirties were insufficiently proletarian, insufficiently militant to live up to the demands of Yenan. The films were no longer to be seen as the forerunners of socialist art but as "poisonous weeds", and the filmmakers were no longer glorious but rather tainted by their association with them.

As for Cheng Jihua, he was termed "a renegade and cultural spy who sneaked into the Party," and "lackey" for the now-condemned cultural big wigs from the thirties. He was alleged to have been working at their behest, submitting his work for their approval. His book was banned largely because of his line on the thirties films, the manuscript for the third volume of the study was destroyed, and he himself was imprisoned in solitary confinement for seven or eight years.[8]

Now, of course, he has been rehabilitated along with the films he praised and the book he wrote. And in making these films of the thirties available again for foreign retrospectives, the Chinese are clearly signaling the return of Cheng's model of Chinese film history, representing the films as the heritage of the cinema of the People's Republic.

This Chinese discourse on the films of the thirties has very specific parameters, stakes and characteristics. Nonetheless, I would argue that not only can it inform

us about film in China by itself, but that it can also be made to interlock productively with Western discourses on the cinema, specifically the various writings on the third cinema that have developed in the last decade or two.

The major manifesto of this tendency, Solanas and Getino's "Toward a Third Cinema," has clear relations to Chinese political and theoretical discourse in general.[9] Solanas and Getino coin the very term "third cinema" as part of a rhetorical figure that speaks of a first, second and third cinema along the lines of the Chinese concept of the first, second and third worlds. Furthermore, the whole piece argues for seeing cinema as contributive and even necessary to the revolution, not merely as a superstructural element that lags behind infrastructural transformations.

This voluntarist line is explicitly rooted in Maoist theory, and various quotes from Mao's *On Practice* are used to buttress the call for a guerilla cinema that can act as a cultural vanguard for the revolution. Cultural vanguardism is of course a policy most closely associated with the Cultural Revolution period in China itself. And indeed, it seems that Solanas and Getino's politico-aesthetic line would be most compatible with the expressed policies of the Cultural Revolution period.

This is because they are expressly intolerant of any work that might be assimilated by the existing system or permitted under the umbrella of liberal reformism, and insist instead that revolutionary filmmakers must strive to make and distribute movies that can only function as direct and intolerable attacks on the system. This is somewhat analogous to the purist interpretation of Mao's *Yenan Talks* that rejects the leftist films and filmmakers of the thirties for working under censorship rather than flaunting it and for pursuing a "national unity" policy seen by the cultural revolutionaries as a compromise and a sell out.

In these circumstances, although it opens important possibilities, Solanas and Getino's manifesto alone limits the degree of compatibility between the writings on Chinese cinema of the thirties and its own discussion of third cinema. This is not only because it pursues a line that corresponds to only one stance in the Chinese framework. It is also because Solanas and Getino have a very specific practice in mind when they write of the third cinema. This consists of the use of lightweight mobile equipment for both production and projection beyond the control of the system, combined with close and direct interaction between filmmakers and viewers in which the films serve as only one part of a wider revolutionary project. They felt this practice was correct for the specific conjuncture they were concerned with, though corresponds in no way to any Chinese filmmaking practice, either during the thirties, or, to the best of my knowledge, any other period.

However, Solanas and Getino's manifesto is not the be all and end all of third cinema. Rather it has come to be a cornerstone in a much broader discursive field. This latter allows for the construction of a stronger and deeper relation with the Chinese discourse on leftist films of the thirties. Teshome Gabriel has synthesized and constructed a much broader field for discussion in *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*.[10] He extends the term "third cinema" so that it may cover a considerable range of films linked by critical analysis according to a set of shared characteristics.

Among these characteristics would be independent production within the third

world and a basic narrative representation of local social and political problems. These should preferably be made as part of an explicit political drive for decolonization and progress in the broad Marxist understanding of the term, and they should preferably match their anti-imperialism with anti-Hollywood styles of filmmaking itself. This much broader conception allows Gabriel to include in his considerations filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, who has patently not worked in the manner prescribed by Solanas and Getino. In so doing, Gabriel transforms third cinema from a prescriptive line into a descriptive field.

In addition to the characteristics mentioned above, Gabriel also limits the objects of his study to relevant film made during or since the sixties. This is where he locates the beginnings of the third cinema tendency with such self-conscious pieces as Solanas and Getino's manifesto. Certainly, this criterion would exclude the leftist films of the thirties from the third cinema. However, in other ways they possess the necessary basic characteristics to be considered as part of or at least as forerunners to the third cinema.

For this study I was able to examine six leftist films of the thirties. They are all major examples cited by Cheng Jihua and made with the involvement of some of the major figures in the Chinese filmmaking world. The films are SPRING SILKWORMS, BIG ROAD, PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM, THE GODDESS, CROSSROADS, and STREET ANGEL.[11] All of them were made by Chinese filmmakers and producers, many of them explicitly making films as a leftist political effort.

Thematically, these films represent the types of social and political problems also found in the films discussed by Gabriel. SPRING SILKWORMS deals with the situation of silk farmers. It represents their control by the whims of the foreign market and their feudal dependence on useless superstition. BIG ROAD depicts the patriotic efforts of urban unemployed youth to go into the interior and support the Chinese army's efforts to resist aggressors (by implication, the Japanese). PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM is a narrative tracing the relentless decline of educated and principled youth, and THE GODDESS is a similarly tragic story of a prostitute and the discrimination she suffers.

STREET ANGEL is a sort of Chinese LOWER DEPTHS, and CROSSROADS shows a group of Chinese youth eventually banding together to go off and defend the nation, presumably against the Japanese. Even stylistically, they do not follow Hollywood paradigms and conventions. They often deploy group narratives which privilege a sense of community over the individual subject, which it has been theorized is so often central to the classic U.S. cinema. In the case of SPRING SILKWORMS, its unusually slow and regular rhythms could be said to express the lifestyle of the farmers.

Because of these characteristics which give the Chinese leftist cinema of the thirties so much in common with the broad range of films already considered by Gabriel to constitute the third cinema, I would argue that these earlier films could also be considered under this umbrella. I recognize that this is not an uncontroversial move. In a review of Gabriel's book, John Hess has already indicated that Gabriel's extended and looser use of the term "third cinema" avoids significant political differences among the films he puts in the category and their more specific contexts.[12]

My aim in extending the term is not to obliterate the socio-historical specificities that would legitimate the third cinema of the sixties' claim to stand alone as a movement. Rather it is an intervention within the politics of education intended to open up a consideration of that specific movement as central among a number of similar tendencies, all of which demand a single, politicized critical rubric yet to be adequately concretized.

The investigation and search for antecedents in films such as STELLA DALLAS and filmmakers such as Dorothy Arzner has proved fruitful in the definition and delimitation of feminist criticism. Similarly, it is my hope that this investigation of the leftist Chinese cinema of the thirties and of the Chinese and Western critical discourses I believe pertinent to it may be useful in some way to the development of third cinema criticism, even if it later proves preferable to rename this field in such a way as to distinguish it from the specific sixties movement which engendered it.

As this suggests, as well as their objects of study, it is also useful to consider the two discourses under examination in terms of their projects, in terms of what is at stake in their respective arguments. Here again there is enough in common between them to provide the basis for a productive interchange. Broadly speaking, they share a common interest in Marxist aesthetics. Both discourses revolve around attempts to determine appropriate politico-aesthetic standards for the evaluation of films and then try to assess films according to those values.

Although Gabriel subtitled his book 'The Aesthetics of Liberation," and although it contains much theoretical discussion of its object, neither Gabriel nor Chinese authors such as Cheng Jihua spend a great deal of space arguing out their politico-aesthetic standards. In China, critical discourses tend to take the form of assertion rather than argument, and the possibility of alternative positions is rarely admitted. To do so would be interpreted as questioning the established line, a stance threatening to democratic centralist principles of discipline.

In the West, on the other hand, it seems that the unpleasant memory of now discredited essentialst standards of "art" criticism based on idealist assertions of what cinema "really is" such as auteurism or Bazinian realist aesthetics, combined with well-known institutional pressures may account for the widespread (although not universal) tendency toward abstentionism among academics in critical studies.

In the latter circumstances, although a vague leftism often infuses many writings, very few of us have developed the skills to be rigorous or even explicit in discussions of our aesthetics. We still have a very loose idea of what a Marxist aesthetic is, or of how we would determine if a film lived up to it. However, placing different politico-aesthetic traditions in juxtaposition may encourage a more thorough consideration by all parties.

Recently, many Chinese scholars and filmmakers are known to have expressed a personal interest in the left modernist tradition of the West. If radical formalism, for example, has some impact either as a negative or a positive model in Chinese criticism, the results might well be very interesting. Similarly, if this sort of situation can encourage a more thorough examination of "the aesthetics of liberation" here, the results will also be very useful indeed. I don't intend to

consider the broad debate here. But I would like to make a few observations about the aesthetic aspects of the Chinese discourse on the films of the thirties, and also about Gabriel's aesthetic.

One of the most immediately striking observations to be made about the Chinese discourse is that there is almost no distinction between filmmaker and film. To condemn one is to condemn the other. If the filmmaker was working according to the correct line, that is to say if his intentions are perceived to have been good, it is very unlikely that the film will be condemned. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that most attention is paid to the production end of a movie. After all, reception is usually beyond the control of the filmmaker and why should she or he be held responsible for something they cannot control?

It seems as if two major elements come into play in judging a film. First, what were the intentions of the filmmaker and what policy was she or he following? Second, a Socialist Realist style principle of mimesis which appears to follow the traditional Marxist lines familiar to us courtesy of Lukacs, Stalin, Zhdanov, et al is also applied. Can the film be said to have accurately represented the topic it has chosen to deal with?

For example, Cheng's criticisms attend mostly to the faithfulness of adaptation and also representation in SPRING SILKWORMS. He praises its eye for accurate detail and its almost documentary investigation of the silk farming process from caterpillar to cocoon are praised. He pays no explicit attention to rhetoric or actual reception, except to note that the film was well received by the cinema-going public. This appears as an unproblematized zone of communication. If the film conforms to mimetic and political requirements it seems to be the assumption that viewers will learn from it as a sort of object lesson.

Gabriel's major concern is also with representation. This has already been indicated in my discussion of the ways in which Chinese leftist films of the thirties fit with his requirements for third cinema. Of course, style is covered in a preference for anti-illusionist or non-Hollywood filmmaking, but nonetheless the main stress is on themes. This again makes sense. In the West access to the means of production and access to representation, although important and possibly understated in film criticism, are much less difficult than they are in most of the third world.

The very fact that these films were made in China at a time of economic colonialism and that they represented the life and problems of Chinese people rather than bad simulations of Western fantasies are indeed considerable achievements. However, it does seem important to me that other aspects of the whole communication should also be given rigorous examination, most notably textual rhetoric and concrete reception.

On the rhetorical level, spectator positioning may best be examined in terms of knowledge assumed or required of the viewer for adequate decoding. Point of view shots are rare, not least because of the frequent narrative concern with a group rather than an individual, and these films do not generally lend themselves easily to a Bellourian type of analysis based on the delegation of the look. However, based on the six films I have examined, they appear to have been aiming for a fairly consistent audience.

Certain referential materials are represented as worthy of intense investigation, others as being so familiar as to slip into the background. In these terms, the films are clearly directed toward an urban, professional audience rather than to a proletarian or peasant audience. In SPRING SILKWORMS the painstaking labor involved in caring for the worms is presented in great detail, presumably to convey to an audience unfamiliar with the work or with the general effects of physical labor how exhausting it is. In BIG ROAD, road construction is represented with similar concern to communicate the physical strain of the job, and in PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM the impoverished hero's work in a factory is represented not only in detail but also with the unusual use of acutely angled shots of him heaving and pulling.

When the films present the urban middle-class, no concern appears that this might be unfamiliar or exotic to the audience. Such things as trams and automobiles are not deemed worthy of examination, and offices are matter of fact locations for many scenes. Filing and form-filling are never examined with the sort of fascination reserved for physical exertion. Most tellingly, not only is familiarity with professional city life taken for granted, but literacy and education are also necessary to decode many of the subtler points.

Many of the main characters are alienated and down-at-heels college graduates, and the narrative of such films as CROSSROADS and PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM concern themselves with their travails, which I presume would not necessarily attract the sympathy of the average factory laborer. It is not uncommon for these main characters to make literary allusions which would pass an uneducated viewer by. The implications of a wall poster of the leftist writer Lu Xun in the background of a shot in CROSSROADS could easily be missed. And in STREET ANGEL subsidiary headlines next to main headlines in shots of newspaper texts are often used to insert politically sensitive reminders of such things as the Japanese aggression, without running into censorship difficulties, in the face of Chiang Kai-Shek's conciliationism.

STREET ANGEL also features elements which although less obstructive than the newspapers to basic decoding by the uneducated, require a very esoteric left liberal knowledge. In the opening sequence of the film, there is a series of shots which seem to constitute a direct reference to Eisenstein's work. Various low angle shots of lion statues echo the famous rising lion montage in POTEMKIN. A series of shots of various religious buildings at extreme left and right angles seem almost to quote from OCTOBER. The very opening shot of the film seems to summarize the tendencies noted here. The shot opens with a view of a city skyscraper. Slowly the camera moves down the skyscraper, and the audience is moved from the elevated, Westernized location where it begins down until it is literally below ground level. A subtitle, requiring literacy and knowledge of foreign literature, appears: "Shanghai — the lower layers."

As well as being directed toward a middle class, city audience, the films often seem to depend upon that audience having attitudes that might seem questionable from any Marxist standpoint, and which certainly would not sit well with the purist requirements of a Yenan aesthetic. Despite my earlier observations, there is one scene in which an office is exoticized. This occurs in STREET ANGEL, when two of the main characters visit an office building. A great deal of humor ensues because

of their ignorance of central heating, water dispensers, glue pots, coffee and so forth. For this scene to be effective, it is not only necessary that the film audience be familiar with these objects, but also that they should be prepared to laugh at those who are not.

Examples such as this indicate that the working class might be viewed sympathetically but that they are certainly not esteemed. This becomes most clear in films dealing with college students, such as CROSSROADS and PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM, both of which construct a move toward doing physical labor as a tragic decline for their main characters. In PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM it is interesting to note in addition that the transition is also marked by a series of changes of clothes for the hero.

When working in an office, he wears a new Western suit. Unemployed, he is in tattered Western clothes, and then, as things get worse, in a dour Chinese gentleman's robe. Finally, when reduced to manual labor in a factory, he wears the tattered clothes of a Chinese workman. Although most of the films make their anti-imperialism clear, instances such as this and the examples of references to foreign arts in STREET ANGEL indicate a far more ambiguous attitude to the West than a clear-cut call for the rejection of all things foreign.

The rhetorical instances given in the last paragraph would seem to call the leftist pretensions of these films into question. However, there are additional circumstances to be borne in mind. Mostly these revolve around the possibilities of the precise historical conjuncture. Although a great deal more work needs to be done in this area, it seems that the available audience was the middle-class city dwellers. Film distribution and exhibition was beyond the control of the leftists, and the financial and political restrictions of the time would have prevented them from moving toward an alternative structure.

In addition, they were dependent for capital and support on producers who were less likely to support their political cause. Again, there were no lightweight cameras available for a guerilla cinema in the sense that Solanas and Getino call for it. And finally, it is clear that the filmmakers themselves were precisely the sort of liberal middle-class people their audiences were implied to be, and that in the circumstances, these were the most leftist people who would be likely to have had access to the means of production.

Finally, although these films might not conform to an idealist notion of socialist art, they were certainly progressive when compared to other films in distribution at the time, and they appealed to an audience which, although not salt of the earth proletarians, constituted one of the main supports of the Communists when they came to power in 1949.

It seems, then, that these final considerations complicate any politico-aesthetic judgment. Various questions need to be discussed further. How much more information about conditions of reception can be obtained for these films? Were there any alternative, private distribution networks, and were they large enough to support an alternative filmmaking practice? To what degree was the attitude fostered by these films a desirable one, both in and of itself, and in terms of building a necessary political coalition for the Communists to eventually come to power?

In these circumstances, although it must be clear that my sympathies lie with Cheng Jihua's assessment of the films at this stage, it is necessary to suspend judgment because no clear statement can be made about the films. One thing however is clear. The very politico-aesthetic ambiguity that these films continue to raise is precisely what continues to make them fertile ground for the consideration and argument of Marxist aesthetics, and on this basis at least, they may productively enter Western discourse.

NOTES

1. Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and Noel Burch, *To The Distant Observer; Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: U. C. Press, 1979).

2. See, for example, ibid, p. 66, n9; p. 81; p. 96, n4; p. 107, n15; p. 307.

3. David Bordwell makes this and other useful criticisms in his review article on *To The Distant Observer* in *Wide Angle*, 3:4 (1980). Another useful critique is Robert Cohen's "Toward a Theory of Japanese Narrative," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, (Spring 1981), pp. 181-200.

4. Donald Richie, *Ozu*, (Berkeley: U. C. Press, 1974).

5. Cheng Jihua, (chief ed.), *Zhongguo Dianying Fazhanshi*, (Beijing: China Film Press, 1963). Although hitherto available only in Chinese, plans are underway to publish this vital book in both French and English.

6. *Heroes Without Battlefields: A History of Chinese Filmmaking since 1949*, diss., Harvard University, 1983.

7. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967).

8. For sample criticisms of Cheng Jihua, see: *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily) April 1, 1966, pp. 5-6 and April 19, 1966, p. 6; *Chinese Literature*, 1968. No. 6, pp. 95-10G; and *Jiefangfun Wenyi* (Liberation Army Literature and Art Gazette), 1968, No. 10, pp. 17-24.

9. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema." in *Movies and Methods,* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: U. C. Press, 1976), pp. 44-64.

10. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1982).

11. SPRING SILKWORMS (Mingxing Studio, Shanghai, 1933. Directed by Cheng Bugao. Screenplay by Xia Yan), BIG ROAD (Lianhua Studio, Shanghai, 1934. Written and directed by Sun Yu), PLUNDER OF PEACH AND PLUM (Diantong Studio, Shanghai, 1934. Directed by Ying Yunwei. Screenplay by Yuan Muzhi), THE GODDESS (Lianhua Studio, Shanghai, 1934. Written and directed by Wu Yonggang), CROSSROADS (Mingxing Studio, Shanghai, 1937. Written and directed by Shen Xiling), and STREET ANGEL (Mingxing Studio, Shanghai, 1937. Written and directed by Yuan Muzhi).

12. *Film Quarterly*, 37:4 (summer, 1984), p. 36.

Two stage sisters
The blossoming of a
revolutionary aesthetic

by Gina Marchetti

On the eve of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in 1964, Xie Jin brought to the screen a story about the changing lives of women in 20th century China set against the backdrop of the Shaoxing opera world. Although rooted in the intimate story of two actresses and the vicissitudes of their relationship, Xie gave the film, TWO STAGE SISTERS, an epic scope by showing these women's lives buffeted by tremendous social and political upheavals.[1][open notes in new window] The film covers the years from 1935-1950, the expanses of the Zhejiang countryside as well as Shanghai tinder Japanese and Guomindang (KMT) rule.

Chunhua (Xie Fang), a young widow about to be sold by her inlaws, escapes and becomes an apprentice in a traveling Shaoxing folk opera troupe. Yuehong (Cao Yindi), who plays the male roles in the all-female opera company, befriends Chunhua. After the death of Yuehong's father, Chunhua and Yuehong find themselves sold to a Shanghai opera theatre to replace the fading star, Shang Shuihua (Shangguan Yunzhu). Eventually, Yuehong falls in love with their manipulative stage manager, Tang (Li Wei), and the sisters quarrel and separate.

Inspired by the radical woman journalist, Jiang Bo (Gao Yuan-sheng), Chunhua continues her career, giving a political flavor to her performances. After an attempt to blind and ruin Chunhua by using Yuchong's testimony to trick her in court, Tang goes off to Taiwan to escape the revolution. Although unable to harm her stage sister in court, Yuehong, ashamed and abandoned by Tang, disappears into the countryside. After Shanghai's liberation by the Communists, however, Chunhua manages to track down Yuehong and the two reconcile.

TWO STAGE SISTERS uses the theatrical world of Shaoxing as a metaphor for political and social change. Also, the film represents a search for a Chinese cinema aesthetic based on these traditions as well as on Hollywood and socialist realist forms. This analysis will explore the intermingling of these aesthetic currents and the ways in which art and politics intertwine in TWO STAGE SISTERS. By placing the film within the context of the political and cultural movements which create it, the drama of the development of Chinese cinema aesthetics since 1949 can be

understood more clearly.

TWO STAGE SISTERS' place within Xie Jin's career

Xie Jin's own background made him particularly well-qualified to direct this tale of Shaoxing opera and Shanghai's theatrical world. Xie was born in Shaoxing (Zhejiang Province) in 1923, but, at the age of 8, he and his family moved to Shanghai. From an early age, Xie Jin was fascinated by the theatre and cinema. While growing up in Shanghai in the 1930s, he had the opportunity to see the work of directors like Cai Chuseng, Sun Yu and Yuan Muzhi — the cream of Shanghai film's "golden era." Also, he began a life-long enthusiasm for the Shaoxing opera of the region.

During the Japanese Occupation, Xie moved to Sichuan province in the interior and studied theatre at the Jiangen Drama Academy. There, he worked with noted theatrical personalities like Huang Zuoling and Zhang Junxiang. In Shanghai and Sichuan, Xie encountered both Chinese folk traditions and Western dramatic and cinematographic forms, and this blending of these two traditions came to characterize his mature work.

When Zhang Junxiang accepted work at the Datong film studio in Shanghai in 1948, Xie went along as his assistant director. After 1949, Xie Jin continued on in Shanghai, co-directing A WAVE ON UNREST with Lin Nong in 1954. His first solo effort was SPRING DAYS IN WATER VILLAGE in 1955. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Xie's style matured in an aesthetic crucible, which ground together Hollywood classicism, Soviet socialist realism, Shanghai dramatic traditions and indigenous folk opera forms.

Many of Xies films focus on the lives of women workers, artists or students. WOMAN BASKETBALL PLAYER #5 (1957) explores the problems that a young female athlete faces in coming to grips with her ambitions in the field of sports. THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (1961) deals with the heroism of women who go from peasant life to guerrilla warfare in the 1930s. TWO STAGE SISTERS, of course, explores the lives of women working on the Chinese stage. In all these films, women's lives represent both hardship and oppression as well as the potential for revolutionary change. In fact, throughout most of his career, Xie has been at the forefront of the exploration of different representations of women within socialist cinema.

With the condemnation of Xie's comedy BIG LI, LITTLE LI AND OLD LI (1962) and TWO STAGE SISTERS (1964), followed by the complete shutdown of the Shanghai studios, Xic Jin's output dwindled to next to nothing during the GPCR. During that period, however, Xie did work on two films based on model operas — THE PORT (1972) and PANSHIWAN (1975).[2] Since 1976, Xie has made several films including YOUTH (1977), AH, CRADLE (1980), THE LEGEND OF TIANYUN MOUNTAIN (1980), THE HERDSMAN (1982), QUI UN (1983), and GARLANDS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN (1984).[3]

All of these films made after the Cultural Revolution show a marked change in Xie's oeuvre. Diverging from his earlier films, which tend to deal with and support socialist revolution, the later works seem to be more nationalistic than revolutionary in character and are occasionally critical of past party policies.

Recently, Xie has completed a film adaptation of the novel, *A Small Town Called Hybiscus*, which deals with life during the Cultural Revolution in the countryside.

The theatrical world of TWO STAGE SISTERS

TWO STAGE SISTERS is one of the few films made in the PRC to be based on an original screenplay rather than a script adapted from a well-known literary or dramatic work. However, the film still remains deeply indebted to the literary and theatrical world of modern China. In fact, the entire film revolves around the theatre and uses the stage to underscore the changes in its protagonists' lives as well as the dramatic political changes which occurred between 1935 and 1950.

The first third of TWO STAGE SISTERS deals with the itinerant opera theatre of Zhejiang Province. Shaoxing opera differs considerably from the Beijing style opera better known in the West. Although Beijing opera has set a certain standard of performance which has influenced regional styles considerably, other non-Mandarin language opera styles have always existed and continue to flourish in most regions of China. According to Cohn MacKerras' account of Chinese opera in *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day*, Shaoxing opera originated in the later days of the Qing dynasty and is, therefore, a rather recent addition to the history of Chinese regional theatre.[4] Arising out of folk music traditions in the countryside, Shaoxing eventually became popular in urban areas, where it began to be performed in permanent theatres as well as tea houses and open-air market pavilions.

The prevalence of all female troupes makes Shaoxing stand out among other Chinese regional opera forms. Records show that in 1923 an all-female company performed in Shanghai. Eventually, schools were started in the countryside for actresses, and many troupes either added women to their companies or performed with exclusively female casts.

Because of its elegant costumes, complex gestures and often intricate plot lines, many may be under the mistaken impression that Chinese opera is an art form exclusively for aristocrats, intellectuals and the wealthy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although performed at court and patronized by powerful landlords and businessmen, Chinese opera has always remained, far more importantly, a folk form enjoyed by a broad range of people in Chinese society.

In fact, the opening sequence of TWO STAGE SISTERS delineates the differences between the glittering fantasy of the stage performance and the poverty of both the players and their audience. Performed in marketplaces and financed by the passing of a hat, opera could be listened to and enjoyed by everyone regardless of social station or gender. The volume and exaggerated articulation of the singing, the use of stylized gestures in pantomimes, and the elaborate costumes attracted the attention of passers-by, who may have had no intention of watching the opera to begin with, but who were drawn in by the commotion.

If nothing else, Chinese opera is loud and its extensive use of percussion instruments like the pan (clapper) not only emphasizes important actions for dramatic effect, but also reminds an audience preoccupied with gambling, bartering, snoozing or chitchat that something important is happening on stage. Thus, as Chunhua's escape from her in-laws causes a tremendous ruckus in an

already cacophonous marketplace, Yuehong, playing the young gentleman, and Xiao Xing, another actress playing a comic servant as indicated by the white band of makeup across her nose, barely bat an eye and continue singing.

Although many urban intellectuals were attracted to and wrote for the opera stage and although a select few opera performers like the noted female impersonator of Beijing opera, Mei Lanfang, achieved super-stardom, most opera singers and musicians were of peasant stock and as poor as their audiences. Most of these itinerant performers — like the theatre artists of the Elizabethan stage — were treated like thieves and prostitutes and considered the lowest rung of society. Despite this stigma, however, desperate women trying to escape the harshness of the feudal peasant family, or the impossibility of life in an overpopulated countryside bled dry by greedy landlords, continuously fueled the Shaoxing opera ranks.

In many ways, the life story of the Shaoxing actress Fan Ruijuan parallels that of the fictitious Chunhua in TWO STAGE SISTERS. Fan's account of her life on the Shaoxing stage reflects the same sense of desperation and determination evident in the film. As Fan Ruijuan states in her memoir, An Actress' Life in Old China, hers was not an uncommon life:

"I was only 11 when I joined a Shaoxing opera theater in 1935. At that time, more than 20,000 of the 400,000 people living in Chengxian County, my native place in Zhejiang Province and the birthplace of Shaoxing Opera, had left their homes to become opera singers. Life was hard. My family was living on bran cakes, sweet potatoes and clover, which were all that we could afford on father's meager income as an odd job man. To me, opera singing seemed to be the only alternative to the miserable life of the child bride."[5]

Ironically, for Fan, as well as for Chunhua in TWO STAGE SISTERS, joining Shaoxing meant jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Early opera training for these young girls consisted of beatings, starvation, humiliation and long hours of hard labor. Virtually enslaved to the troupe's manager, opera performers often worked for room and board alone in order to pay for their training. Underfed and often lice ridden or tubercular, they were forced to travel miles on foot through winter snowstorms and still perform flawlessly the moment the troupe arrived at its destination.

Aside from being indentured to a theatrical manager, opera performers were also looked upon as sexually available to customers. Throughout the history of Chinese opera, stories abound about young boys taken into opera companies to play female roles and act as homosexual prostitutes. Traveling female performers also often served as prostitutes. When the opera troupe in TWO STAGE SISTERS performs an all night stint, expectations extend beyond the mere singing of opera tunes. Lord Ni, a wealthy landowner, hopes to enjoy more than an evening of opera from Yuehong and Chunhua as an unspoken part of his agreement.

This incident not only underscores opera performers lack of power over their lives, but it also brings out the ironic contrast between the fantasies performed on stage and the actual lives of the Shaoxing actresses. Yuehong as the young gentleman scholar and Chunhua as the innocent ingenue sing operas about romantic love. Yet such romance was something completely beyond the expectations of young women

born into a brutally patriarchal society of arranged marriages, child brides, concubinage, prostitution and child slavery.

Many operas feature dynamic female generals, swordswomen, and female fairy spirits with martial talents supported by a will to exercise them. In contrast, the lives of the actresses in Shaoxing only testify to the powerlessness of women in the Chinese countryside. In one scene, for instance, the local policeman sent by Lord Ni, after Yuehong refused the lord's advances, drags off and pillories Chunhua, still wearing the opera clothing associated with a female warrior role. Chunhua resists, but to no avail. Romance and martial victory for women on stage contrast sharply with oppression, humiliation and total impotence off stage.

The theatrical world Yuehong and Chunhua enter in the Shanghai of 1941 is, in many ways, as harsh and demanding as the one left behind in the countryside. However, they also enter an urban environment very different from rural life. Shanghai was a thriving port filled with Western concessions not allowed in other parts of China during the late Qing period. It had a reputation as a wide-open port and city of intrigue. It had always been a center of progressive ideas and innovative theatrical forms, as well as its seamy side of money, power, poverty and corruption. Notorious for harboring revolutionists, the Shanghai theatre district was home to many actors-turned-activitists from the time of the toppling of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

When a demonstration in Beijing on May 4, 1919, led to China's refusal to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which favored Japanese interests in Asia, the Shanghai intellectual scene also helped to usher in a new movement begun with this demonstration and called the May Fourth or New Cultural Movement. Trying to bring China into the modern world, artists, politicians, literary and theatrical figures, young scholars and students in all disciplines looked to both the West and a new sense of Chinese nationalism for inspiration.

Although many artists involved with the New Cultural Movement tried to survive in Shanghai under the Japanese Occupation, most — particularly the most politically radical — fled either to the Communist Party strongholds around Yenan or to the KMT controlled areas in the south. Traditional opera and the world of light entertainment, however, managed business as usual under the Japanese.

After World War II, Shanghai once again fell under the control of the KMT. In TWO STAGE SISTERS, the bitter political struggles which ensued between the Communists and the KMT are metaphorically represented by the turmoil within the theatrical world. Jiang Bo, who represents the spirit of May Fourth and its hope for the emancipation of women, and Chunhua go to battle with the KMT-backed Tang over their right to produce socially conscious operas and compete with Tang's own theatrical interests.

In 1946, Jiang Bo takes Chunhua to a memorial exhibition commemorating the tenth anniversary of the death of Lu Xun. A principal motive force behind the New Cultural Movement, Lu Xun stands as a symbol of the interconnection between revolutionary politics and the arts. Born in Shaoxing, Lu Xun was associated throughout his life with the literary and theatrical world of Shanghai and Zhejiang Province. Always a champion of the rights of women, Lu Xun wrote essays on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, against enforced chastity for women and the sexual double

standard, as well as several essays commemorating the deaths of young female student activists.

Lu Xun also dealt with poverty and women's issues in his fiction. His novella, *The New Year's Sacrifice*, for example, deals with the plight of a poor widow in China, known simply as "Xiang Lin's Wife." When Chunhua sees an etching of this character from "The New Year's Sacrifice," a superimposition of her face with the print shows Chunhua's identification with Lu Xun's creation.

On stage, in an opera based on the novella, Chunhua appears as the doomed peasant widow — singing an aria in torn rags with whitened hair. This brief excerpt from the story acts as a shorthand reference to the quantum changes going on within Chinese theatre and, by extension, Chinese society. Western influences have been absorbed and come full circle, so that the plight of a downtrodden peasant widow can become fit subject matter for an art form which had entertained the imperial courts and the landed gentry. The opera world had changed significantly.

At this point, the on-stage world of TWO STAGE SISTERS parallels rather than contrasts with the back-stage drama of the film. Instead of a world of light comedy and romance, The New Year's Sacrifice points to the possibility of a socially and politically committed theatre. This theatre takes the plight of the average woman in China as a metaphor for the oppressive nature of all levels of society.

After the Revolution, Chunhua resumes her life as an itinerant opera performer — with a difference. Now, she performs revolutionary opera and travels from village to village as a theatrical cadre to educate the peasantry about revolutionary reform. She performs a type of opera stylistically closer to traditional Shaoxing than the socially committed New Year's Sacrifice, but with a clear political message.

In Hangzhou, where Chunhua had been pilloried, the troupe stages an opera version of *The While-Haired Girl*. Written in Yenan in 1943, this play became the standard for all sorts of revolutionary drama to follow after 1949. Originally written for the theatre, *The White-Haired Girl*, has been produced as an opera, filmed, danced as a ballet, and also inspired revolutionary graphic art.

After all sorts of violations and humiliations by feudal landlords and their minions, Xi-er, a young peasant woman, is driven to take refuge in a cave, living like a wild animal. Because of this adversity, her hair turns completely white and she acquires a reputation for fierceness as well as madness. The Red Army discovers her in her cave and she is reunited with her fiancé. As Raphael Bassan points out in his essay, "The Long March of Chinese Cinema," *The White-Haired Girl* contains all the elements necessary to insure it a lasting place of influence on all revolutionary film and theatre to follow in the PRC:

> "It ["The White-Haired Girl"] serves as a model, particularly at the level of the presentation of the conflicts of the people in opposition to the landlords, for all revolutionary realism to come. All is, in fact, judiciously coded: the unfailing will of the heroine, the courage and abnegation of the disinherited, the always 100% negative profile of the oppressors, and, finally, the idealistic portrait of the Communist soldiers (who are also Party cadres), new guides of the Chinese nation."
> [6]

The spirit of Yenan drama as well as the theatre which followed the Revolution can be traced to Mao's personal interest in art and cultural affairs. In his famous "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," Mao took time out from the arduous tasks of fighting the war against the Japanese and dealing with the daily difficulties of running the Yenan soviet to discuss the importance of China's "cultural army" in the country's battle against both foreign enemies and domestic strife. He calls for committed artists to draw on a variety of forms — including traditional ones — to both appeal to and educate the Chinese masses:

> "We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and an that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people."[7]

Not surprisingly, Mao's talks at Yenan led to the type of revolutionary drama exemplified by *The While-Haired Girl*. Firmly rooted in traditional theatre and folklore, the play presents a clear moral universe with peasants replacing noble lords and generals as heroes and heroines. Its mythic elements, magical transformations, and stock character types place it squarely within folk theatre traditions. Later, Yenan theatre became the basis for Mao's "revolutionary romanticism" as well as the GPCR's model operas.

In TWO STAGE SISTERS, Chunhua's performance of *The White-Haired Girl* bears as much resemblance to *The New Year's Sacrifice* as it does to traditional Shaoxing opera. Within the film, it functions as a synthesis of the old and the new, China and the West, spoken and opera forms, and as the culmination of all the other, often contradictory, aesthetic currents referred to in the film. Although it relies on the stylization of traditional opera for its effect, it also deals with contemporary life, with actual change, with current political and social concerns. Performing in the public square of Hangzhou, Chunhua has come full circle — melding a May Fourth, urban critical realism with the fantastical nature of folk opera.

Taken as a whole, TWO STAGE SISTERS transcends the insular world of Shaoxing opera to make some far-reaching statements about the nature of oppression and the power of change in 20th century China. Shaoxing serves as a metaphor. Events in the theatrical world — from the feudal countryside through Shanghai enterprise to revolutionary promise — occur in the theatre, which stands as a microcosm of Chinese society at large. Similarly, Chunhua, Yuehong, and Jiang Bo stand in as everywoman, extraordinary in their notoriety, but only a step away from the vastness of the peasantry. The structural parallels are obvious but effective. The personal dramas of the stage sisters parallel the fictional worlds of the plays they perform, which, in turn, parallel the political changes occurring in Chinese society.

Perhaps the most important parallel to consider, however, is the connection between the aesthetic of the film itself and the aesthetic development of the fictional theatrical world it chronicles. After all, TWO STAGE SISTERS is itself very much like Chinese opera. Its episodic narrative structure, for example, relies on often disjointed, autonomous sequences to give it a sweeping scope and an ability

to deal with all aspects of society.

Moreover, like opera, the film relies on music to both frame and underline important dramatic moments and to place these moments within a broader social and narrative context. For example, the film opens with a sweeping crane shot that takes in the expanses of the Zhejiang countryside before settling on the opera being performed in the marketplace. A female chorus accompanies this crane shot. The same chorus also accompanies similar crane shots later in the film as well as several montage sequences, which interrupt and comment on the narrative flow — just as traditional opera narrative may be interrupted by arias or by physical action sequences choreographed to instrumental music.

Similarly, as in traditional opera, an orchestra punctuates moments of intense drama with percussion or full orchestral musical phrases. For example, the music swells when Chunhua and Yuehong face each other after Chunhua's acceptance into the opera troupe and at other similarly dramatic moments. In addition, the gesture, speech and movements of the characters in TWO STAGE SISTERS often take on the highly stylized air of traditional opera.

Opera training, for example, involves hours of exercises devoted to making eye movements more expressive by following a candle flame in a darkened room. Many of the eye movements within the film draw on this aspect of opera tradition — e.g., Chunhua's passionate glances at Yuehong when the latter begins to drift away in Shanghai, Yuehong's startled and terrified glance at Tang after he slaps her across the face before their appearance in court, etc.

The similarity of the characters in TWO STAGE SISTERS to some traditional opera heroines must also be noted. In many ways, Chunhua appears as a modem recreation of the *wu dan* or *dao ma dan* — martial heroines like Mu Guiying, the famous female general of traditional opera stories.[8] Like the female warrior characters she performs on stage, Chunhua is aggressive, physically powerful, morally upright and inevitably victorious. In fact, the representation of the revolutionary heroine in the preponderance of films made in the PRC owes a great debt to traditional opera characterizations. Similarly, the villains take on characteristics of wicked generals, evil-spirited demons or monks from their stage counterparts.

However, although TWO STAGE SISTERS' aesthetics are rooted in traditional opera in many important ways, the film also gathers stylistic momentum from the other developments in theater alluded to in the film's plot. In many ways, TWO STAGE SISTERS owes a great deal to the same May Fourth impulses which gave rise to Lu Xun's mature style, represented in the film by *The New Year's Sacrifice*. Like Lu Xun's novella, TWO STAGE SISTERS uses central female characters to concretize all sorts of social ills.

In addition, TWO STAGE SISTERS makes full use of the naturalistic detail characteristic of May Fourth literature. Seemingly insignificant images take on dramatic weight — from laundry being washed in the river after sunset to drops of blood in a bowl of water or on a white sleeve to the straw hats an abandoned woman must make to survive.

Although epic in scope like traditional opera, TWO STAGE SISTERS also has the

chamber quality of a literature influenced by Ibsen and Western critical realism. Jiang Bo cooks rice, which boils over as she discusses sexism, classism and the theatre with Chunhua. A montage sequence shows the daily routine of the traveling troupe from calisthenics for martial roles to memorizing lines while walking from town to town. This attention to what may appear to be nearly irrelevant detail creates a sense of the particularity of the social fabric, a concrete feeling of the historical period — as it does in the best of Western critical realism.

Just as the narrative of TWO STAGE SISTERS culminates with the performance of *The White-Haired Girl*, the aesthetic strivings of the film itself perhaps most closely resemble Mao's vision of a "revolutionary romanticism" wedded to that Western sense of realism. TWO STAGE SISTERS' plot, for example, follows the trials of a young peasant woman, who, instead of ending her life as an obscure beggar like Xiang Lin's Wife in *The New Year's Sacrifice*, almost magically transforms herself into a revolutionary heroine. With a few exceptions, TWO STAGE SISTERS deals with crystal clear conflicts — between masters and slaves, lords and peasants, powerful men and helpless women — in which traditional power relations are overturned. As in all revolutionary romanticism, the Revolution becomes the most important motive force for change. Its coming resolves virtually all of the narrative conflicts. Just as Xi-er joins up with her lover and the Red Army in *The White-Haired Girl*, Yuehong, transformed by her suffering at the hands of Tang, joins up with Chunhua and the revolutionary opera company at the end of TWO STAGE SISTERS. Individual concerns find public resolution in the political arena.

However, although TWO STAGE SISTERS conveniently contains the seeds of its own aesthetic unraveling within its plot, this discussion does not do justice to aesthetic concerns which transcend 20th century Chinese drama. Like most Chinese films of its era, TWO STAGE SISTERS walks a tightrope between indigenous forms and very foreign influences — between "revolutionary romanticism" and what Godard has called "Hollywood Mosfilm."

Hollywood and Moscow: Matters of Fact and Questions of Form

During his sojourn in China, Jay Leyda found himself quite taken aback by the Chinese film industry's indebtedness to Hollywood:

> "The influence of Hollywood, and in one of its worse aspects, was a shock. First, it contradicted everything that I heard and read here about the poisons and falsehoods of Hollywood being discarded by a revolutionary, bold, new Chinese cinema. The Soviet cinema had been occasionally tempted in the same way, but never so unblushingly as here. And I was shocked to find here a part of the past revived that was long since judged as a sham and embarrassment, while a new important Chinese film [SONG OF YOUTH] turned away deliberately from the progress being made in world cinema, even so near as Moscow and Warsaw" (Leyda, p. 247).

Certainly, the influence o Hollywood on TWO STAGE SISTERS cannot be denied. In fact, if the character of Jiang Bo and the Revolution were erased from the script, the film could quite easily be mistaken for a Hollywood backstage melodrama. It has all the classic narrative elements — the hard struggle to the top of the theatrical

profession, the bitterness of the aging actress' lot, the inevitability of decline, sour romances, misguided ambitions, competition, romantic needs vying with the dream of theatrical success, the hardships of the actors' exploitation by unsympathetic bosses.

However, in addition to this indebtedness to Hollywood and despite Leyda's comment that Chinese film tends to ignore Soviet cinema, TWO STAGE SISTERS also owes much to Soviet socialist realism. In fact, a careful examination of the film underscores the similarities as well as the fundamental differences between classical Hollywood realism and Soviet socialist realism.

With some exceptions, for example, TWO STAGE SISTERS seems to strive for that transparency and clarity so prized by both Hollywood and socialist realism. The film creates a self-contained world: lit, photographed, composed, edited, and scripted in a self-effacing, Hollywood style. Characters are not as psychologically complex as their Hollywood counterparts, perhaps, but they are more than uni-dimensional. The narrative is linear, if episodic. The familiar codes of narrative and aesthetic form allow disbelief willingly to be suspended.

However, although Hollywood and socialist realism may be spoken of in the same breath as essentially the same thing, actually the two differ fundamentally. TWO STAGE SISTERS perhaps owes a greater debt to Moscow than Leyda would be willing to admit. Characterization in TWO STAGE SISTERS, for example, follows many of the conventions traditionally associated with socialist realism. Each character represents a certain class position and the contradictions associated with a specific historical period. Lord Ni and Tang, for example, represent a position of power through ownership, which exploits the women peasants and workers in the film. Although individually quite distinct, these characters function as "types" — exemplary of the ruling order in both rural and urban pre-revolutionary China.

However, typage by gender and class does not rubber stamp a character, but it allows for possible points of identification. Each character embodies a certain idea and has a certain abstract potential. Chunhua, for example, functions often as an icon beyond the narrative, an abstraction of a "typical" woman's awakening into class and social consciousness. She represents both a psychologically credible Hollywood-styled character and an abstract idea, a type in the socialist realist mold.

With history foregrounded as a narrative force in socialist realism, other classical realist narrative techniques also change. In the socialist realist text, a tension surfaces between polemics and plot; plot structure becomes subordinated to the rhetorical necessity of making a political point. Narrative structure seems to be transformed by this injection of history and the necessity of generalization and abstraction operative in socialist realism.

For example, although TWO STAGE SISTERS' narrative is, for the most part, linear, it certainly does not follow the Aristotlean dramatic unity so dear to most types of classical realist fictions. In order to broaden the geographic, temporal and social scope of the issues dealt with in the film, the episodic narrative presents incidents often only tangentially related to the development of the principal plotline. The device of the itinerant theatrical troupe provides an excellent vehicle for this. Both before and after the Revolution, the troupe drifts along the river in

the countryside — encountering peasants and wealthy landowners. Characters appear, are used to make a point, disappear, occasionally reappear to make another point, or simply vanish.

In addition, the film structures events into a series of dialectical relations. Chunhua and Yuehong's lives not only parallel one another, for example, but they have a profound effect on one another. Moreover, by seeing their lives juxtaposed, the viewer can synthesize certain ideas about the treatment of women, the limitations on their lives, and their struggles.

In the cases of Chunhua and Yuehong, two approaches are explored — thus, Chunhuas choice to work against the system is understandable only in relation to Yuehong's decision to live within it. When the two clash in the courtroom, the whole system explodes, and the Revolution arrives in the streets of Shanghai in the following scene — a direct result of dialectical conflict.

The Brecht Connection: Chinese Opera and Epic Theatre

After I have discussed TWO STAGE SISTER's roots in Chinese theatre, Hollywood melodrama and socialist realism, the aesthetic sum of all this seems to add up to something rather different from the aggregate of its parts. After all, Xie Jin has taken from a genre at the edges of Hollywood classicism — the melodrama.

Recent criticism has pointed out that melodramas often strain the formal foundations of classical Hollywood realism to its limits.[9] Perhaps Xie Jin delivers on this promise. If TWO STAGE SISTERS resembles Hollywood melodrama or Soviet socialist realism, it still remains at the edge of those forms — at the boundary between classical realist conventions and something quite different.

There seems to be something within the formal structure of TWO STAGE SISTERS — coupled with the film's revolutionary politics — which places it very close to Brecht's notion of epic theatre. Although Xie Jin would be the first to deny any conscious similarity between his work and Brecht's, perhaps a closer look at both the film and Brecht's writings may reveal some interesting parallels.[10]

Despite the notoriety of his debates with Lukacs on the applicability/inappropriateness of taking up the 19th century realist novel as a model for socialist art, Brecht, while arguing against that form of realism, never placed his own aesthetic ideas outside of a broader realist tradition. Anti-illusionist and anti-Aristotlean rather than anti-realist, Brecht sought to break down the illusion of transparency created by bourgeois theatre as well as the emotional identification and catharsis invited by Aristotlean drama.

Instead, Brecht tried to distance the spectator from the drama by breaking the illusion of an invisible fourth, wall and by distancing the spectator from the actors on stage by making the viewers constantly aware of the fact that the players were simply presenting a role constructed for them. In this way, Brecht hoped to create a critical distance between the play and the spectator, so that the playgoer would be inspired to think about the social and political issues under discussion rather than become involved with the characters as "real people' with individual problems.

Certainly, similar principles of distanciation can be seen at work in TWO STAGE

SISTERS. After all, the film revolves around the performance of other fictions, i.e., operas, which constantly alert the viewer to the fact that the film, too, is a constructed fiction. Moreover, TWO STAGE SISTERS's structure resembles opera — with disjointed episodes, major leaps in time and distance, choral interludes, and many other elements which foreground its structuring principles and place it far outside Aristotlean traditions. Both the orchestra and the camera intrude self-consciously on the drama, acting as storytellers, commenting and reflecting on the characters' place within the historical moment.

Similarly, just as Sirk or Fassbinder create compositions which frame characters within doorways and window frames to place them figuratively outside society, Xie uses the same techniques for political analysis. This distance allows the viewer room for reflection on issues outside of any emotional involvement with the characters as individuals.

For example, after a scene which features a political discussion in Jiang Bo's apartment, a storm develops outside. Chunhua and Jiang Bo go to the rooftop apartment's doorway. The camera frames them inside and dollies back. With this shot, the camera figuratively places the characters' lives in perspective. The narrative comes to a temporary halt — and the viewer may reflect on these characters' position within history, within a developing political struggle.

Political changes break like a storm, and the implicit metaphor takes the viewer away from the drama for a moment. As Brecht hopes "the spectator stands outside, studies" in epic theatre, Xie Jin's camerawork seems to formally allow the viewer this same critical distance in TWO STAGE SISTERS.[11]

The similarity between TWO STAGE SISTERS and Brecht's notion of epic theatre goes beyond mere coincidence. However, although TWO STAGE SISTERS postdated epic theatre and achieves several of its hoped-for effects, it would be taking the argument too far to say that Brechtian aesthetics directly influenced Xie Jin. Rather, the common roots and common purposes of Brecht and Xie must be kept in mind.

At bottom, Brecht and Xie both owe a considerable aesthetic debt to traditional Chinese opera. Although originally a folk form, Chinese opera developed a high degree of stylistic sophistication within its long history. Outside of traditions of Western realism, Chinese opera formed its own aesthetic standards, its own perspective on the relationship between art and actuality. Brecht particularly admired Chinese opera's aesthetic self-consciousness and delight in conventionality.

In an essay entitled "Mei Lanfang, Stanislavsky, Brecht — A Study in Contrasts," Huang Zuolin notes that Brecht was particularly taken with the famous opera star Mei Lanfang's acting technique and with the Chinese opera's attitude toward performance in general. In fact, Huang traces Brecht's notion of "quotation" acting to traditional Chinese storytelling techniques:

> "In the course of his work, Brecht actually adopted a number of techniques from the traditional Chinese theatre. One of these is his method of 'quotation.' He makes an actor 'quote' the character played, like a traditional Chinese storyteller who steps in and out of the role at

will, sometimes into the part, sometimes making comments in the first person. This shifting of position facilitates the unfolding of the story, the delineation of character, and the elucidation of the author's intention."[12]

Brecht states in his essay, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting":

> "Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were acrobats...The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work.[13]

Similarly, in TWO STAGE SISTERS, as the narrative bandies back and forth between on-stage and off-stage life, characterization takes on a quality of quotation.

Furthermore, the visual presentation of the self to be looked at by others also operates as an "alienation effect." To cite simply one example, when Chunhua and Yuehong first arrive in Shanghai, they see Shuihua for the first time backstage as she puts on her makeup. The camera's position allows the viewer to see Shuihua looking at her reflection in the mirror as well as the dumbfounded faces of Chunhua and Yuehong. Whether the two young actresses arc openmouthed because of the older actress' age or because they are simply star struck is never elucidated.

However, in this shot, the film viewer confronts a character, aware of being watched within the narrative, preparing to be watched within another fictional drama, i.e., the opera to be performed. Chunhua and Yuehong seem aware of their own similar positions as actresses aging within the theatre. Perhaps the viewer becomes aware, at this dramatically intense moment, of yet another element — the fact that all three are portrayed by screen actresses who may face similar career problems. (Since this film was not released to the general public until after the GPCR, this effect may have been further heightened by the fact that the actress who portrays Shuihua, Shangguan Yunzhu, had died during that period; her death was subsequently blamed on the stress she underwent because of the GPCR.) This moment allows the viewer to think critically about women's lives, class struggle and the nature of oppression — reflecting on the drama as Shuihua reflects on her image in the mirror.

In many ways, e.g., in its allusions to other dramatic works, its narrative ellipses, its stylistic self-consciousness, TWO STAGE SISTERS must be regarded as a very sophisticated film by Western standards — with certain affinities with Western modernism and international developments in Marxist aesthetics. However, beneath this complexity, there is also an innocence, a moral directness, an

ingenuous hope for a brighter future.

Coming from traditional theatre, a folk aesthetic, TWO STAGE SISTERS certainly has a "naive" quality, and this quality finally brings the film closest to Brecht's dream of a drama which is both didactic and popular, critical and supportive of revolutionary change. In his essay, "Epic Theater and Counter-Cinema's Principles," Alan Lovell makes the following astute observation: "Increasingly, Brecht described the quality he was searching for in his art as 'Naivete.'"[14]

Perhaps, TWO STAGE SISTERS comes close to Brecht's longing for "naivete," since it draws on the folk art roots of Chinese opera to shape a modern aesthetic, to reform a relationship between art and the people obscured within a post-industrial era.

TWO STAGE SISTERS and the Cultural Revolution

After tracing the aesthetic roots of TWO STAGE SISTERS from folk opera through Lu Xun to Brecht and Mao himself, it seems unlikely that anyone could come up with another film indebted to as many strains of Marxist aesthetics. However, TWO STAGE SISTERS was not released to the public until after the GPCR had ended, and the film was viciously attacked politically while it was still in production. In order to understand the reasons for TWO STAGE SISTERS' suppression, the film must be placed within the context of the political events going on at the time of its production.

In 1958, Mao Zedong launched China on an exceedingly ambitious project of reform which he called The Great Leap Forward." Designed to quicken the transformation of China into a model socialist society by increasing the size and power of both rural and urban communes, the program rather quickly collapsed the following year. In 1959, Mao stepped down as chairman of the People's Republic in favor of Liu Shaoqi, although Mao remained head of the Communist Party.[15]

In his essay, "The Limits of Cultural Thaw: Chinese Cinema in the Early 1960s," Paul G. Pickowicz notes that the end of the Great Leap Forward and Mao's temporary loss of power had some significant effects on the Chinese film industry. [16] Even though there was a decrease in production, greater emphasis was placed on quality filmmaking and carefully crafted stories.

As Pickowicz points out, the publication of an essay by Xia Yan in 1961 entitled "Raise Our Country's Film Art to a New Level" ushered in the new era for the Chinese cinema. One of the best known of the "left-wing" filmmakers during the golden age of the Shanghai studios in the 1930s, Xia Yan had risen in the Party ranks after 1949 to become Vice Minister of Culture. In this 1961 essay, implicitly critical of the Great Leap Forward, Xia calls for greater autonomy for artists and for more diversity within the cinema.

Certainly, Xia's directives had an impact since this period — between the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution — was characterized by a tremendous diversity in both form and subject matter within the cinema. Production ranged from domestic comedies like LI SHUANGSHUANG (dir. Lu Ren, 1962) to dramas about life in pre-revolutionary China like THE LIN FAMILY'S SHOP (dir. Shui Hua, 1959).

Stories about intellectuals and their romantic as well as political exploits like Xie Tieli's EARLY SPRING (a.k.a. SECOND LUNAR MONTH, THRESHOLD OF SPRING, 1964) were produced alongside films about revolutionary activities in the countryside like Xie Jin's THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (1960).

However, this period came to a rather abrupt end with the reassertion of Mao's power in the mid-1960s. The Cultural Revolution saw the mobilization of youth in the guise of the Red Guard, further radicalization of peasants and workers, dismantling of huge chunks of the bureaucratic superstructure, and purge of many Party cadres.

Interestingly, many of the Cultural Revolution's most heated battles were fought in the aesthetic realm, and the Shanghai cinema industry became one of its prime targets. In fact, during much of the Cultural Revolution, feature film production ceased. Because of his calls for reform after the Great Leap Forward, Xia Yan stood out for censure. As Xie un has pointed out TWO STAGE SISTERS fared particularly badly because of Xia Yan's association with the project:

"Wutai jicmei" [TWO STAGE SISTERS] and 'Zaochun eryue" [Xie Tieli's EARLY SPRING] were attacked above all because of Xia Yan who had made corrections and suggestions on the screenplay. By attacking the films, they wanted to attack him. For "Wutai jiemei," Xia Yan not only helped me a lot in writing the screenplay, but it was he himself who encouraged me to make the film. And that was one of the 'crimes' of which he was accused during the Cultural Revolution.[17]

Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and head of the "Gang of Four" in power during the Cultural Revolution, had a particular dislike for Xia Yan, which extended back to her days as an actress in Shanghai. Beyond the personality clashes, Jiang Qing also had very clear and firm ideas about what a Chinese revolutionary drama should look like. The controversy became divided along geographic lines, which paralleled political ones. Revolutionary art outside the boundaries of the aesthetic developed in the Yenan soviet during the War lost all validity and was thought of as somehow "impure."

If TWO STAGE SISTERS could be looked at not as a harmonious mixture of Yenan and Shanghai influences, but as a battleground between two notions of what a politically progressive art should look like, then perhaps the bitterness of the film's condemnation can be better understood. Although indebted to Yenan's "The White-Haired Girl" and Mao's "revolutionary romanticism," TWO STAGE SISTERS' aesthetic heart remains in the world of Shanghai, and this aesthetic debt assured its condemnation.

Even in works like TWO STAGE SISTERS, which so fervently support the Party and the Revolution, the GPCR's proponents could unearth a bourgeois, Western sensibility. In literary and dramatic works, characterization became a politically charged issue. A notion of a "middle" character developed. In TWO STAGE SISTERS, for example, Yuehong stands out. Neither heroic nor villainous, she aids her own oppressors through avarice and sheer stupidity. She is also, however, sympathetic, a victim, and she is eventually "redeemed" by the love of her stage sister. The morally ambivalent nature of this character places her somewhere outside the realm of heroics or infamy. In the "middle," moral ambivalence leads to ambiguity and, in turn, to the possibility of subversive readings. Likewise, the

illusion of psychological complexity which characterized the "middle character" places Yuehong squarely with a Western tradition of naturalism. Descriptive detail outweighs didactic precision, and once again, the possibility of a subversive reading appears.

No reading could be more strained than this, however. More important, no degree of censure should rob TWO STAGE SISTERS of its right to he taken seriously within the history of Marxist aesthetics. In its attempt to locate a peculiarly Chinese socialist aesthetic which can do justice to the representation of women, TWO STAGE SISTERS raises issues which go beyond the Chinese film industry and the Cultural Revolution.

NOTES

1. TWO STAGE SISTERS Chinese title WUTAI JIEMEI is also translated as TWO ACTRESSES, SISTERS OF THE STAGE.

For an overview of film in the PRC, see Jay Leyda, *Dianying: Electric Shadows: An Account of Films and Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972) or Regis Bergeron, *Le cinéma chinois: 1949-1983* (Paris: L'Harmauon, 1984). Kwok and M.C. Quiquenelle, "Le cinéma chinois et le réalisme," *Ombres électriques: panorama du cinéma chinois, 1925-1982* (Paris: Centre de Documentation sur le Cinéma Chinois, 1982) is also informative.

2. For information on film during the Cultural Revolution, see Paul Clark, "Filmmaking in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981," *The China Quarterly*, June 1983, pp. 304-322.

3. For more biographical information on Xie Jin, see Marco Muller, "Les tribulations d'un cinéaste chinois en Chine," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 344 (Feb. 1983), pp. 16-21. Same interview in Italian: Marco Muller, "Intervista con Xie Jin," in *Ombre Electriche: Saggi e Richerche sul Cinema Cinese* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Electra, 1982). Charles Tesson, "Xie Jin: Celui par qui le melo arrive," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 344 (Feb. 1983), pp. 12-15.

4. Cohn Mackerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975.)

5. Fan Ruijuan, "An Actress' Life in Old China," in *When They Were Young* (Women of China and New World Press, 1983), p. 158.

6. Raphael Bassan, "La longue marche du cinéma chinois," *La revue du cinéma*, No. 380 (Feb. 1983), p. 77. Translation mine.

7. Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press,

1971), p. 259.

8. Opera terms are in Mandarin, taken from Dong Chensheng, *Paintings of Beijing Opera Characters* (Beijing: Zhaohua Publishing House, 1981). For more information on the relation between Chinese opera and film, see Geremie Barme, "Persistance de la tradition aux 'royaume des ombres.' Quelques notes vis ont a contribuer a une approche nouvelle de cinema chinois," in *Le cinéma chinois*, ed. Marie-Claire Quiquemelle and Jean-Loup Passek (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985).

9. For example, see: Griselda Pollock, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Stephen Heath, "Dossier on Melodrama," *Screen*, 18: No. 2 (Summer,1977), pp. 105-119.

10. Interview with Xie Jin by author, translation by Janet Yang, San Francisco, April 1985.

11. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 37.

12. Huang Zuolin, "Mei Lanfang, Stanislavsky, Brecht—A Study in Contrasts," *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang: A Guide to China's Traditional Theatre and the Art of its Great Master* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981), p. 16.

13. Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," ibid., pp. 91-92.

14. Alan Lovell, "Epic Theater and Counter Cinema's Principles," JUMP CUT, No. 27 (July, 1982), p. 66.

15. For more information on the relation between revolutionary politics and aesthetics in 20th century China, see Johnathan D. Spence, *The Gate Of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution—1895-1980* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981). Chapter 12 includes extensive background information on the period under discussion here.

16. *Perspectives in Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

17. Muller, ibid., p. 19.

Interview with Xie Jin

by Da Huo'er

In 1981 Xie Jin was hailed as the Wajda of China in Turin, Italy, at the largest Chinese film retrospective ever organized in the West. Four years later, his films at last found their way to North America. In 1985, a retrospective of ten of Xie's twenty-odd films made in the past 32 years finally toured the United States.

Born in Shaoxing in 1923, Xie Jin grew up during World War II, when Japan invaded China. In his late teens he went to Jiang-an School of Dramatic Arts in Szechuan, studying under the prominent playwrights, Cao Yu and Hong Shen, and reading Ibsen, Shakespeare and Chekov. He had his first industry job in the Datong Studio shortly before the Liberation in 1949, after which he went to Shanghai and made his directorial debut in 1953 with A WAVE OF UNREST.His first popular success was WOMAN BASKETBALL PLAYER #5 (1957), acclaimed both at home and in Moscow. He continued to display his interest in women protagonists in THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (1960), one of the films commissioned to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic: (This film is not to be confused with Jiang Qing's model opera of the same name.) TWO STAGE SISTERS (1964), criticized severely during the Cultural Revolution, received critical acclaim when shown in Britain in 1980 and has been shown on British television numerous times since then.During the Cultural Revolution, Xie Jin was ostracized and thrown into a "Monsters and Ghost Pen," a punishment given to many of Xie's generation. Rehabilitated within five years, he resumed his filmmaking. Yet still THE LEGEND OF TIANYUN MOUNTAIN (1981) and THE HERDSMAN (1982) aroused widespread controversy. Both films dealt with people's experience of political purges. Xie's humanistic, affirmative outlook as well as his strong commitment to China's cultural identity have caused some European critics to liken him to Wajda.After his very successful WREATHS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN (1984), a patriotic film on Chinese army life set during the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979, Xie has gone on to adapt the novel *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* by Gu Hua about rural life during the 1960s and 1970s.

The following interview is edited from a few conversations I had with Xie Jin in New York during his recent visit.

DH: You started your directorial career right after the Liberation. In the past three

decades, you have gone through major political phases, including the Anti-Rightist campaign, the Great Leap Forward of the late 50s, the Cultural Revolution of the 60s, now the post-Gang-of-Four era. How have these events, particularly the Cultural Revolution, affected your films?

XJ: During the Cultural Revolution, BIG LI, YOUNG LI AND OLD LI [1962, a film dealing with mass sports activities in a meat processing factory] was condemned for "vulgarizing and caricaturing the working class." It is the only comedy I've made. In general comedies came under heavy attack during the Cultural Revolution. To begin with, I don't particularly enjoy directing comedies. And in those days it was difficult to handle comedies, to achieve the right political balance in them. Say, you want to criticize the bureaucrats. If you go too far, you'll run into trouble; if you're too reserved, you defeat your own purpose.

And in the middle of filming TWO STAGE SISTERS [1964, a melodrama of the lives of two opera actresses from rags to stardom, and who eventually took separate paths in Japanese-occupied Shanghai], criticisms began. I was forced to change the script. Today I admit that the first part of TWO STAGE SISTERS seems more or less well done, but the second part seems weak to me. I couldn't finish it the way I would have liked. If I could redo the second part now, it would improve the entire film.

When THE LEGEND OF TIANYUN MOUNTAIN [a film of a woman's heartbreaking battle against the bureaucracy during a "Rightist Purge" for her ex-lover whom she once betrayed] came out in 1981, it stirred a stormy controversy, centering on the vindication of "rightists." While being criticized, I received thousands of letters thanking me for reflecting these people's suffering during the Anti-Rightist campaign. Some of the letters literally moved me to tears. However, the film TIANYUN MOUNTAIN did not give me further trouble. Personally, except under the regime of the Gang of Four, I have had liberty to initiate my own ideas.

DH: Who has influenced your work?

Xi: Naturally, Chinese films of the 30s, those that I saw when I was little. Cai Chusheng, Sun Yu, Shen Xiling all became my favorite directors. But then I found other sources from outside the cinema as well-classical literature and traditional operas. I was impressed by the precise and vivid storytelling of Pingtan [storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect] and the finesse in how Szechuan and Shaoxing operas treated characters. [Both are local opera forms named after their providences; Szechuen opera is known for its chorus and clown lead characters while Shaoxing opera is known for its traditionally all-female cast and dazzling costumes.]

DH: How about foreign filmmakers?

Xi: U.S. cinema had exerted an important influence on Chinese cinema of the 30s. In fact, most of the foreign films released at that time were U.S. movies. The American directors I admire most are John Ford and Mervyn LeRoy. Ford uses spectacular staging, and LeRoy's depiction of characters interests me very much.

However, the strongest influence on the generation of directors that came upon the scene after the Liberation is no doubt Soviet cinema. Among the Soviets, I admire

Mikhail Romm, Sergi Gerassimov, Yuli Raizman, Grigori Chukhrai and Sergei Eisenstein. All of Romm's films, from the silent ones to NINE DAYS OF THE YEAR [1962], are my favorites. I consider him one of my masters. My creativity becomes nourished from his works, which are so profound and so alive. Eisenstein is, of course, important to any one interested in cinema. However, his theory of montage has not had a major impact on us. I am quite surprised that the students of cinema in the U.S. know so much about Eisenstein but not about the other Soviet directors who have carried forward Russia's great cultural heritage. Soviet cinema has a profound moral seriousness and depth.

But let's not forget Italian cinema. I personally have seen THE BICYCLE THIEF and ROME ELEVEN O'CLOCK some seventy times during the dubbing and printing of the Chinese versions.

DH: Western theater made an important contribution to the development of Chinese film aesthetics in the 1920s and 1930s. People like Mei Lan-fang, the famous Peking opera female-impersonator, were very interested in Western dramatic theory and, in turn, theorists like Brecht and Eisenstein were influenced by Mei and traditional Chinese opera forms. How popular are Stanislavski and Brecht in China now?

Xi: Most of Stanislavski's writings were translated during the 40s and we studied him in the 50s. By comparison, Brecht has had less influence. Both Brecht and Stanislavski were denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Now we teach them in the curriculum of drama and film studies in China.

DH: Overseas Chinese intellectuals often believe that the 30s and the 40s remain the Golden Age of Chinese cinema. How would you comment on that?

Xi: I don't think that's very accurate. I'm afraid I have to disagree. The artistic merit of Chinese cinema from the 30s and 40s is obvious. But I think we have had more than just two good decades. Our country made a number of very good movies to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Liberation. [To cite a few, THE LIN FAMILY SHOP (Shui Hua), THE SONG OF YOUTH (Cui Wei) and THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (Xie Jin).] Had we develped from there, instead of being disrupted for the past twenty years, we could have come to a point of tremendous distinction. As it is, we have to pick up from where we were. Hopefully we are heading for a new era.

DH: Many people wonder why the movies made in 1960 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of The Liberation reveal such a burst of creativity and artistic freedom, when only two years before, the Anti-Rightist campaign came down so heavily on intellectuals?

XJ: Yes. However, the better commemoration films were all historical dramas set in the pre-liberation days. Don't be mistaken that these films attempted to read the present into the past. There were also films dealing with issues about peasants and the working class. But artistically those were not very successful.

DH: There are many memorable portrayals of women in your films. Song Wei and Feng Qinglan in TIANYUN MOUNTAIN, Chunhua and Yuehong in TWO STAGE SISTERS, and Li Xiuzhi in THE HERDSMAN, are those that immediately come to

mind. Would you say that you are more concerned with the fate of women in modern China?

Xi: To begin with, in the scripts I often find my female characters better portrayed than the male ones. And naturally this has something to do with my interests, and choices. My childhood memory remains full of oppressed, victimized women. Under feudal oppression, the suffering of men could not be compared to that of women. To say the least, a man was allowed to keep several wives, while a widow was never permitted to marry again. It would bring too much shame on her family. I had a grandaunt whose husband died when she was barely 19 years old. She was told to adopt an in-law's child as her son. After that she had nothing to expect from life any more. What could she do in a widowhood that was going to last for 60 years? What could she do with her desires and natural needs? Every night she helped herself to sleep by counting a string of coins like a rosary. Gradually the engraving on the coins was worn off. The whole string became bright, polished, shiny. It was one of my saddest memories.

DH: What obstacles are faced by Chinese filmmakers?

Xi: The big problem is, as in the rest of the world, our great demand for good scripts. A number of good Chinese films have adapted literary works. I myself have adapted quite a few novels — THE LEGEND OF TIANYUN MOUNTAIN, THE HERDSMAN and THE WREATHS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN. Quite different from in the rest of the world, a screenwriter in China today is more respected than a director. In terms of payment, a screenwriter always gets more. There is a kind of imbalance here and I think something needs to be done.

DH: You joined the Party recently. Does your present Party status affect you artistically and politically as compared to your non-Party-member days?

Xi: If trouble comes, it comes, regardless of your political status. I have always only wanted to do my job. Having gone through various political crises, I've become more adamant about what I have to do and say. Often people complain that we've wasted too many years during the Cultural Revolution and made too many mistakes. But what's done cannot be undone, and it's not just one person's suffering that we're talking about. In my own films, I've tried to instill some optimism into our people — it's like what the protagonist in THE HERDSMAN says, "A son will not be put off by his mother's unkempt look." Let's review our past and face up to it.

DH: Now a new generation of post-Cultural Revolution directors are emerging from China. Recently Chen Keige's YELLOW EARTH (1984) and Tian Zhuongzhuang's ON THE HUNTING GROUND (1984) have been a sensation among Hong Kong and European critics. What's your opinion of them?

Xi: This new generation of filmmakers seems more open to new ideas. I hope they'll explore their own vision, work out good scripts, and not alienate the masses. Clearly they form a burgeoning force in Chinese cinema.

FILMOGRAPHY
(Compiled by *Film Biweekly*, Hong Kong)

1951 THE DENUNCIATION (KONG SU)
1953 RENDEZVOUS AT ORCHID BRIDGE (LANQIAOHU)
1954 A WAVE OF UNREST (YICHANG FENGBO)
1955 SPRING OVER THE IRRIGATED LAND (SHIAXIANG DE CHUNTIAN)
1956 SPRING FESTIVAL (CHUNJIE DA LIANHUAN)
1957 WOMAN BASKETBALL PLAYER #5 (NULAN WUHAO)
1958 A segment in LITTLE MASTERS OF THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD (DA YUETJIU ZHONG DE XIAO ZHUREN)
1958 VIGOROUS GRASS AGAINST WIND (JI FENG JINCAO)
1958 A segment in SHORT STORIES OF THE STORM (DA GENGLAND LI DE XIAO GUSHI)
1958 SISTER HUANG BAOMEI (HUANG BAOMEI)
1960 THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (HONGSE NIANGZIJUN)
1962 BIG LI, YOUNG LI & OLD LI (DA LI, XIAO LI HE LAO LI)
1964 TWO STAGE SISTERS (WUTAI JIEMEI)
1972 THE PORT (HAIGANG), co-directed with Xie Tieli
1975 BAY OF ROCKS (PANSHIWAN)
1976 SPRING SPROUT (CHUNMIAO)
1977 YOUTH (QING CHUM)
1980 OH, CRADLE (A! YAOLAN)
1981 THE LEGEND OF TIANYIJN MOUNTAIN (TIANYUN HAN CHUANQI)
1982 THE HERDSMAN (MUMAREN)
1983 QIU JIN, A REVOLUTIONARY (QIU JIN)
1984 THE WREATHS AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN (GAO SHAN XIA DE HUA HUAN)
1986 A SMALL TOWN CALLED HIBISCUS (FURONG ZHEN).

An interview with Teng Wenji

by George Semsel

Teng Wenji is among the most important of the current group of young middle-aged Chinese film directors. All but the first of his films have caused considerable controversy within Chinese film circles. AT THE BEACH, completed in 1984, though approved for release by the Film Bureau, was withheld for a period of time shortly after its completion. It was the first Chinese film to explore extensively the possibilities of space within and outside the frame. His next film, NEW STAR, starring Yin Tingru, is China's first film musical. Initially scheduled for release in January, 1986, it, like most of his other films, has been criticized by the leadership in China and was withheld from the public screens for a considerable period of time.

I interviewed Teng Wenji on February 19, 1985. Victor Ochoa and his brother, Adolfo, two young men from Venezuela who have spent most of their adult lives in China, translated. Yin Tingru, currently a graduate film student at Ohio University, who stars in several of Teng Wenji's films including NEW STAR, was also present.

TW: I attended the Beijing Film Academy in 1964. In 1966, the "cultural revolution" came to the Academy. In 1969, I went to work for the People's Liberation Army, and stayed there for four years. You might say I was in the Army for as long as World War I. In 1973, I was assigned to the Xi'an Film Studio.

GS: I understand that a number of promising directors now in their forties didn't get to make films during the ten chaotic years and are still awaiting their chance to direct. People tell me you are luckier than most of them because you got your chance earlier.

TW: I made my first film in 1979, working from a script I finished writing at the end of 1978. At the big studios, you can work for a long time before the older ones move on and you get a chance to direct. You know the truth is I expected to be assigned to the Beijing Film Studio, or some place, because in Xi'an I was only working as a "script girl," not doing much of anything, but one day the studio leadership asked me to show them something I had done. Since I didn't have anything right at hand, I wrote a script. When they saw it, these people at Xi'an liked it very much and asked me to direct it myself. That was THE SOUNDS OF LIFE (1979), my first feature.

The film is about a violinist who recalls, with great sadness, the memory of Zhou Enlai. In those days, if you wrote something like that, you could easily get permission to make it into a film. I thought it was good business as well as good politics. Practically speaking, it was just about the only sure way you could get a film done. You have to understand that in 1977, after the fall of the "Gang of Four," the atmosphere was strong for remembrances of the Prime Minister. All kinds of things were being done: plays, films, books, stories. There was even a Chinese opera. I had studied music in the past, so I approached the film from the musical side. I wanted to make a musical feature.

GS: Was it successful?

TW: As it turned out, it actually got a number of favorable reviews, and I was given a government award for it. I was only thirty-four then, and the award was one given to encourage young artists. The Communist Party in Shaanxi Province, where Xi'an Film Studio is located, gave a prize often thousand yuan [about $4,000]. But even though I was the writer and director of the film, I only got ninety yuan [about $36]. You see, the film actually got the award, and everyone in the studio where it was made got a share of the prize. Even the porter got a share, because he was considered a collaborator on the project.

GS: Nonetheless the success of THE SOUNDS OF LIFE did give you a start on your career, didn't it? Were you able to go right into another production?

TW: I held a series of good posts as the result of this early work. I served on the Committee for Culture and Art, and was also a representative of the Film Association. I wrote a number of articles, too, and started to become known around film circles a bit more. You know, it all happened quite fast for me, and I'm not exactly sure it was a good thing. I held the highest post in the Xi'an Film Association, which was a highly visible position. The attention was all quite pleasing, I have to admit, yet I think I might have been growing too quickly, and I really couldn't afford that. I was like a gas balloon, you know, starting to float up into the air, getting a swelled head. I started to walk differently, talk differently [he demonstrates]. In all honesty, I didn't like that first film.

GS: AWAKENING must have a greater meaning for you then...

TW: Yes, my second film, AWAKENING (1980), was an entirely different sort of thing. It's about a girl with a great deal of musical talent, although the film is not a musical. Chen Chong, the leading lady, who's studying in the United States now, was very famous at that time. This film concerned some of the social problems in China then, a study of the generation gap that we had here. Like every place else in the world, our young people wanted to get away from traditional customs and develop their own freedoms. I wanted to work with this problem in as subtle a fashion as possible because it was clear to me that the only way anyone could treat this kind of thing effectively would be through understatement. I prefer to work in an indirect way. I don't like to take a very direct approach. You know, the bulk of Chinese films lack any subtlety. Most directors make their statements in a very direct way, so you know too quickly what a film is going to be all about. I wanted to do something different, to probe more deeply into the problem.

GS: AWAKENING is quite different from your first film. What kind of response did

it have?

TW: People of a low cultural level couldn't understand the film, but university students, political intellectuals, scholars, people who had been to school, liked it very much. At Fudan University in Shanghai, the students watching started shouting "Long Live AWAKENING." Of course, there was another bunch in the audience who shouted that the director should be lined up against the wall and shot. The Government didn't like it because they said people couldn't understand it. I guess the Government thought that if it couldn't understand it, then people couldn't understand it either. The leaders actually pretended that the film was incomprehensible.

But I must confess there were people in the Government, leaders in the Ministry of Culture, who protected me from the critics. These people were very clever. They agreed that the film was not understandable so that a close critical analysis would be avoided. They were afraid the real meaning of the film would be discovered, that the subject of the film might be considered too dangerous. I'm really grateful to these leaders for doing that. We do have some very wise men working for China. I discovered Yin Tingru while making this film. She had a minor role in it, playing the sister of the lead character, an artist.

GS: That minor role led you to cast Tingru in your next film, A CORNER IN THE CITY?

TW: Yes, I almost immediately turned to A CORNER IN THE CITY (1982), a film about a shipyard in Shanghai. Yin Tingru plays a woman who is named a model worker and, as a result, becomes terribly isolated from her fellow workers. For six months, we lived, ate and worked all around the slums in Shanghai, and in the suburbs, too, on one side of the city. This film caused a lot of controversy after it was released. But Chen Huangmei, one of the Vice-Ministers of Culture, who was in charge of film, thought it was one of the best films of 1982. Of course it didn't win any awards. In fact, the man who wrote the script was accused of plagiarism. It all turned out to be quite a fiasco.

The critics complained that model workers in Shanghai were not well presented, that they were not isolated at all. The truth, they claimed, is that the Party is very warm towards them, and the masses love them. "How dare you claim they're isolated?" they asked. "Shanghai is full of tall beautiful buildings. Why don't you go and film them instead of filming in the slums?" They were bothered, you know, by the big fire scene in the slums. Then they complained that Yin Tingru didn't look enough like a worker. Workers are supposed to be strong and tough. Model workers, especially, are supposed to be very tall and solid. Actually the critics helped her, because all the attention the film got made her quite well-known. Everyone started taking photographs of her and she ended up on magazine covers.

GS: Did it help you, too?

TW: I have to admit that I did all right, too. To console me, I was given an honorable mention at the Golden Rooster Awards, the awards given out by the China Film Academy, you know, the professionals. They gave me an honorable mention as the Best Young Director of the Year [1982]. They couldn't give me the full award because of the controversy. Besides, the cultural circles were talking

about the film, and that was certainly important, and Film Annual centered on the film. So the criticism turned out to be helpful, and led to a lot of thinking about the film, and the subject, too, for that matter, and that certainly was a good thing.

GS: Obviously the criticism didn't stop you from working.

TW: On the contrary. I don't have time to rest. There's just too much I want to do, and besides, I'd never back away from the controversial. I do what I think is important. I don't have time to worry about whether or not a work will stir up a lot of trouble. I don't know any serious artist who does. My next film was SYMPHONY OF COOKING UTENSILS (1983), which many people find strange and amusing title, at least. It was based on a short novel, but I wrote the script. It was attacked by all the film magazines in China. There wasn't a single magazine or paper which didn't talk about it. The film is about a reformer who is always fails at love. I was accused of painting this reformist black, of putting him down. The critics said that reformists should be considered saints, or angels. But this guy, every time he has a love affair, falls flat on his face. Yin Tingru plays the female lead. The two stars fall in love, but they never "make it" together. After that, I started working on a film about Hou Baolin, a famous storyteller, a man who did crosstalks and monologues, but I didn't finish that script. Instead, I made AT THE BEACH. The scriptwriter, Qin Peichun, the man who was accused of plagiarizing A CORNER IN THE CITY had been criticized to the point where he couldn't hold his head up. He was feeling very down, really dragging, and had become very pessimistic. I wanted to help him, so I rescued him with this film. Both of his scripts are originals, not based on stories.

GS: Is it hard to find original scripts in China?

TW: Not at all. There are two sources of film materials: scripts based on literary works, and those written from scratch. I've only done one film based on a novel; the others are all from original scripts. In this particular film, I was a friend of the writer, and wanted to give him moral support.

GS: A number of people I've talked with here tell me that China considers film a literary art, that it is not an original art form. I've met people in the business who say it's not an art at all, but a form of propaganda.

TW: I'm sure you've found a bit of that, but that's really old-fashioned thinking. You have to understand that a lot of the critics, and directors, too, came into film from literary circles. They're the ones who think that film is only a mirror of literature or, at best, a creation of literature. They're wrong.

GS: Clearly the best films I've seen in China, at least the newer ones, are very strong cinematically. ON THE HUNTING GROUND, GIRL IN RED, YELLOW LAND, YAMAHA FISH STALL, and your own new film are all visually very interesting, and are loaded with fresh energy.

TW: It is true, though, that not a great deal of effort has gone into visuals or sound, either, over the years. A few filmmakers pay some attention to beautiful scenic shots, but emphasis has generally been on the qualities of the story. The story has always been thought of as the most important thing in China, in all of the arts, not just in film.

GS: Which is why, I suppose, that at the discussion of AT THE BEACH the Film Bureau held at the Minorities Palace, many speakers didn't seem to have an especially strong vocabulary for criticizing the visual aspects of film. I remember being quite surprised at the time because I found that the cinematography in the film was a central issue. The camera work is outstanding, and contributes a great deal to the meaning.

TW: You had a solid glimpse into the current state of cinema in China. Each step for the critics and those dealing with film is very difficult to take. They simply don't care about the things they should care about. They don't consider what they should consider. They don't consider the visuals. They don't consider the sound. Their thinking is terribly old-fashioned. In the end, they simply pass off film as propaganda. They don't understand just how wonderful a medium it is. A lot of people, including the leaders in film circles, say they don't understand AT THE BEACH. They say they don't understand what I'm teaching, what the message is. They don't see the propaganda. They don't get it. I'm not straightforward enough to suit them.

GS: That surprises me because I found it clear enough despite my meager grasp of Chinese, though the film certainly warrants careful analysis. I was taken by how the characters in the factory of the new town are often filmed through pipes, as though caught in cages, maybe even cages they built themselves. I thought this visual concept was echoed clearly in the fishermen's nets, especially when the lead fisherman spreads his net dawn the street of the town.

TW: You're very observant, but you may be looking at films in ways the Chinese critics do not. There's no doubt that people here didn't get that message. Some of them said they thought it was about a wedding between close relatives, about how incest might lead to having a retarded child. Yes, some people told me that they thought that was all I was getting at. They didn't make the metaphoric connection between incest and other things in society.

GS: Incest is the central image, but the richness of the film goes beyond that. I liked the use of the beach itself, the images derived from it. I was struck by the strength of the cinematography, by how the beauty of the beach is countered by the crude lives of the fishermen who won't surrender their primitive methods because that's all they, or their forefathers, have ever done. I also saw an implicit warning that industry in the new town could cause the destruction of the environment even though, in this instance, fish come. The sound track is wonderful, something I haven't found in many other Chinese films. In fact, I've been disappointed with the music in most Chinese films.

TW: I consider visuals a form akin to music. Before we did any shooting, I did a series of paintings for every shot in the film, a very carefully prepared storyboard, and the cinematographer tried to create each painting as accurately as possible. Color in the film is also based upon musical rhythms. I wanted to do with color what was done so very well with sound. That's why I did the main frames myself. In the shooting, of course, it wasn't always possible to duplicate what I painted, but generally speaking, things were the same. I've done two films this way, and it's led me to be more precise in the shooting. I feel it gives me beforehand some guarantee of what I'll end up with in the can.

The film I'm working on now, China's first musical, will be done the same way. I'll shoot some things on the spur of the moment, if it seems wise to do so, but everything's a response to what I've already established. This means that I must have a close relationship with my cinematographer in the pre-production phases. In most cases, even if I shoot as the situation demands, I expect the result to conform to my plan. The few deviations add flavor to the work.

GS: Do you approach the music in the same way?

TW: I treat music in exactly the same way I do the visuals. Tan Dun gave me an exceptionally wonderful score for AT THE BEACH. He used electronic sounds in place of all natural sounds. It does things to the film. It gives a stronger dimension to it. You know the Chinese don't often work closely with the musicians in films, and that creates problems. I feel I have to work closely with the musicians. I studied conducting for a while at the Music Academy, and that helped me understand the rhythms of film a great deal. Not enough directors are acquainted with music, but they should be. I was fortunate, I guess.

GS: Have you had any responses to AT THE BEACH? I know it hasn't had general release yet, but it has been shown at a number of universities, and the Film Bureau held a lengthy discussion of it at the Minorities Palace. I was asked to sit in on that.

TW: The Film Association has already published some notes, and a number of magazines have taken up the controversy. The main comments are probably what you heard at the Film Bureau discussion. Officially they called it immature because they expected me to provide some kind of final answers or conclusions. They found instead that I only gave them ambiguity. Ambiguity is not a virtue in the Chinese arts, traditionally. It's not really what they expected. They don't want people to draw their own conclusions. The Chinese audience is trained not to think, but to accept a given end. As you said, the film has not yet been shown to the masses.

GS: A film like AT THE BEACH would find an interested audience in the U.S. Would China ever send a film abroad without releasing it first to the domestic audience?

TW: Only one film, MY MEMORIES OF OLD BEIJING, was every released outside before it was released in China, and that was only to make sure it reached the Manila Film Festival on time. It's unusual for such a thing to take place, but maybe now, under the new policies, there will be other things like it. All films, you must understand, belong to the Government. They represent the State. They represent the Party. It's all under the direction of the Central Committee of the Party, the propaganda division. Its task is divided into different administrations. Film, for example, falls to the Ministry of Culture, yet it is also under the Communist Party.

GS: I understand that you're working now as the first independent filmmaker in China. I find that very interesting. Can you tell me about that? Is it part of the reforms now going on in the People's Republic?

TW: While it's true that I'm the first filmmaker in China who's able to work outside the studio system, I'm not the only one. It's different than in the West, though, and there's still a close relationship with the studio. I'm independent as a creator, but my freedom isn't total. Investment and distribution still depend on the studio

system here. It's become possible for me to use several studios for a single film. I can present a script to a number of studios instead of one to which I've been assigned. Maybe I'll need to shoot at the Pearl River Studio in Guangzhou, but do my sound recording at Beijing, where audio facilities are better. Funding can come to me from any interested company, and then I'll pay the studios for whatever services I require. If the Friendship Hotel wants to put up production money, fine, I'd welcome it. But I don't have power to distribute, and the Film Bureau still must approve the film for release.

GS: How is distribution arranged, then?

TW: As of now, maybe fifteen or sixteen studios have been given permission to distribute. What I must look for are the people who can give approval. You see, it's up to the studios to get the approval. Once they have it, a film can go into distribution. There are some special situations, but still, I can't distribute myself.

GS: Is this new arrangement the way you are making your musical?

TW: NEW STAR has outside backing, but I'd call it a special case. The boss of the producing company is the widow of a famous artist. She became known first as an actress, then later, as a writer. Now she's a businesswoman. She's got good backing, if you know what I mean. She doesn't censor the script, either, so I have an advantage over the usual routine. I have some flexibility, and it's really no more complex a system than the previous way of working. The film, though, has to have commercial value. In a set-up like this, that's very important.

The second film I'm planning this year [1985] will be made with the Co-production Company, and it, too, is outside the normal situation. They operate with special permission. Until recently, all foreigners had to go through them, but even that's changing under reform. The company's no longer so meaningful. In the past, it was responsible for all co-production. Now things are different, and foreigners are able to make their own films.

GS: What are the real advantages to the way you're now working?

TW: Freedom and profit. There's no loss to share (don't tell your unit about this, now. This is a very special case in China.) Both companies I mentioned are out of the norm for Chinese film. If I went back to the Van Studio, the situation wouldn't be like this. The investing companies want to succeed very badly. They work with me because I have a certain amount of fame, a good reputation, and access to excellent and famous people. The way things have been set up, I get no share of profits the first year. In the second year, fifty percent will be my condition, and I'll not have to accept losses should there be any. I'll get my pay regardless.

GS: It's obvious that you're breaking new ground in the Chinese film industry. I suspect you are not alone. Do you find new energies going into film these days?

TW: Of course. It's an exciting medium, and always has been. You know, because you're with the Film Corporation, you've seen a lot of the "official" films. But there's always been a group of "underground" people who have been working, too, trying to do things that are different from what's officially accepted. You've got to meet these people who are working really very hard. The best people aren't

necessarily at the big studios, you know. I'll tell you this, in Shanghai, I'd be treated like a first-grader wanting to get old and be recognized.

But in the small studios, things can happen. They don't have all these old "stars," these authorities, so young directors get a chance to work. It's healthy. You have to realize that the leaders of the smaller studios don't understand the ABC's of film. They're ignorant about filmmaking. When young people are sent to work for them, these leaders are willing to listen to them. The tendency is to accept the young. The little studios give fewer limitations. In the jungle where there are no tigers, the monkey becomes king.

GS: Do you put much of your own life into your films?

TW: Remember the drinking sequence in AT THE BEACH? I knew an old man, a peasant, who was quite calm. He seldom spoke, but he always expressed his thinking in a tune. The tune he used sounded like a kind of Chinese violin. Things like this, when they happen in real life, are hard to forget. I knew that if I ever had the chance, I'd use his tune in a film. So: THE STORY OF LONGLIGGER. Generally, at the beginning of very month, this old man, who never said anything, would receive a letter from home. After he got this letter, he would go to his own place and close the door. We'd all go look in his window to see what would happen. The old man would read the letter, and if the news was good, which meant that his family had received the money he sent, he'd be very happy. He'd sing a simple song: [singing] "Longligger, longligger, longligger long..." If, in another month, the old man received the letter from his home and the news in it was not very good, his family hadn't received the money, and things were going badly, the old man would sing the same tune, but with a different meaning: [singing] "Aiyoyo, Aiyoyo, Aiyoyo, Aiyoyo..." We all started to joke about this among ourselves. We'd imitate him when we went out thinking.

GS: Are there many moments like this in your films?

TW: Yes, I do this often. My life experiences have been very rich. I've got a lot of stories to tell. Besides, I find many things funny. In each film, I add something from my own life.

GS: You write the script first, then add your own life experiences to it?

TW: The films I make are sometimes written by me, and sometimes by others. Even in those written by others, I add a few things from my own life.

GS: All your films have faced criticism. Why?

TW: Each film has been criticized except the first one, which was about the 1976 Tienam'en incident, when the flowers were removed from the memorial after Zhou Enlai's birthday. At that time, my thinking was in close alignment with the people's ideas. At the beginning of my film life, which began right after the fall of the Gang of Four, I wasn't criticized. The second film, AWAKENING, expressed the truth that after the Gang of Four, young people, and the government, too, thought in the same way. Several years later, however, though young people were still thinking progressively, the government stopped them. In AWAKENING, I wanted to say that we'd been living one way for thirty years, and that now, maybe it was time to

try something new. But the government stopped it, saying that wasn't allowed.

In the film, meaning was expressed indirectly. The university students welcomed it, but the younger students and ordinary workers couldn't grasp it. Later the government wrote a number of articles criticizing it. The little sister in the film, played by Yin Tingru, had this line: "Art is the movement to break the chains." That one sentence caused a lot of trouble. The two generations in the film had a great gap between them. The father liked to eat conch, but the son didn't. So when the father asked him to eat a bowl for him, the son said, "No, I don't like it." Understand? A CORNER IN THE CITY, my next film, was criticized because a model worker was shown as isolated from her fellows.

GS: When the government criticizes a film, does that mean it restricts it? Is the film suppressed?

TW: The Government can ban a film if it thinks it necessary. I walk a thin line and try to keep my balance. Someone's been supporting me, I guess. I haven't fallen yet.

GS: But AT THE BEACH hasn't been screened for the public yet.

TW: The Film Bureau gave permission to release it, but recently, it was criticized. They even issued a book about it, and in that book is an article you wrote. The publication was based on the discussion held by the Film Bureau.

GS: I was struck by that discussion because it centered on the content and ignored all other values. I didn't understand why this was being done.

TW: Things like that often happen in China.

YIN TINGRU: They don't care about form. They always talk about content and meaning.

GS: But meaning in a film like AT THE BEACH lies in the form, in the cinematography, in the structure. I can't separate them. The same story told another way wouldn't be this film.

TW: In China, if you want to issue a film, a book, an article, and they want to determine how good it is, they'll spend ninety percent on the content. They don't care about form.

GS: They should.

TW: We do have a few respected writers here who have a deeper understanding of the issues of film. If one of them wrote nine articles about content, and one about form, we'd leave the nine and read the one. Some of these writers have attacked me, saying that behind the forms in my films is a criticism of the socialist system. In writing about A CORNER IN THE CITY, for example, in which the colors are predominantly white, black and blue, one of them argued that these three colors were an implicit criticism of the socialist system. In AT THE BEACH, when I first went on the location, I was overwhelmed by the vastness of the sea. I took shots of old men walking along the beach to show them thinking of the glorious past and the wonderful things which are yet to come. But then somebody said, "An irony! A criticism of the new technology!" The critics said the old fishermen probably feel

lonely because they have nothing to do.

GS: I'm never surprised when I hear people outside of film criticize like that, but I'm unaccustomed to hearing it come from within film circles.

TW: People are used to such criticisms here. If no such criticism came forth, I'd feel uncomfortable. I don't care about that kind of criticism. If I did, I'd dare not shoot any film.

GS: Will AT THE BEACH ever be released?

TW: Yes. The policy in China is changeable, like the four seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. Sometimes you feel very hot, and sometimes you feel very cold. I'm used to such changes.

GS: How's the weather today?

TW: Now it's the end of Winter. Now Spring will come. I can read it in the newspapers. Things are getting better. At the beginning of Spring this year, I thought we were in for more snow, but now, I feel the real Spring is coming. I'm optimistic. In one year, the seasons come twice. I don't care what people from the Film Association say about my films. When we were in Winter, we all felt very cold, and dared not say or do anything. When Spring comes, we'll be very happy, and very active. I do what I must do: make films. The Party Secretary criticized AWAKENING and A CORNER IN THE CITY as "poisoned grass," but I'm still working. I don't care about that. I'm used to the seasons. When Summer comes, I take off my shoes. When Winter comes, I wear clothes. In the Summer I'll wear a pretty shirt. In Winter, I'll wear a leather coat. Right now, I'm wearing a light jacket. Things are loose, open. The film I'm working on now, NEW STAR, will be the first disco musical ever made in China.

(Note: Early in 1986, the Chinese government withheld AT THE BEACH and NEW STAR, but later releaed both films.)

Media in China

by Tani E. Barlow and Donald M. Lowe

The media are not neutral. Not only because different cultures load them with a variety of signs and images, but even more because every culture uses the same media to different ends. In the previous issue we excerpted an article from our book, *Teaching China's Lost Generation*, to chronicle our impressions of film in China. Our book is a journal of our teaching experiences, based on long letters we wrote home, and will be published by Praeger in the near future. Here we introduce a discussion of opera, drama, dance and film, and show how the Chinese tradition of narrativity affects all of them.

* * *

We saw a Peking opera last week, based on an episode from the traditional epic, *Water Margin*, concerned primarily with military strategy. Song Jiang and his bandit heroes try three times to storm a nearby village and rescue their comrades. When the first two plans fall through, Song loses heart and delivers a moving aria, expressing his grief at having failed to come up with a winning strategy. Strategy plays an important role in China's other major epic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and obviously reinforces the importance of heavy plotting in narrative. It rebounds into social relations, too, since people still commonly refer to plot elements when they explain personal motives.

Strategy and heavy plotting also help explain the current craze here for the Western detective novel. Many students have already told us they like detective novels better than any other kind of Western fiction. Partly that is because they have trouble identifying the Christian symbolism and purely Western themes. But their own narrative tradition reinforces their preferences, naturally. Basically, they like reading plots. The longer and more intricate, the better. According to one man, students particularly like "clever strategies which lead to happy endings."

The three one-act ballets we saw the other night at the Shanghai Municipal theatre reflected this modem concern with heavily plotted narrative. All three were adaptations of stories by Lu Xun, the country's most celebrated writer of the century. Since Lu Xun wrote during the first modern revolt against China's traditional literary culture and encouraged writers to draw on Western conventions, it was only appropriate that our audience be made up primarily of foreigners and foreign experts.

Before each ballet-story, a man in a Western suit, tie and all, appeared on stage and gave an account of what the ballet meant. He left nothing to individual imagination, since conventionally plots and character portraits ought to render only one, "correct," reading. "Soul" based on Lu Xun's "Autumn Sacrifices," was a fantasy about a woman who dreams the ghosts of her two husbands pursue her through hell. The second ballet consisted of a trite, impressionistic sentimental romance, totally out of character with Lu Xun's caustic spirit and poorly choreographed. It was as though in moving away from representational mime the dancers had lost inspiration.

"The True Story of Ah Q," based on the author's greatest work, combined Western and Chinese dance techniques beautifully, and leaned heavily on ballet mime, clarifying everything, leaving nothing to the imagination. But since the twists and turns of the anti-hero Ah Q's personal history communicate the idiocy and defensiveness of pre-revolutionary Chinese, the literalness of the ballet's plot intensified the performance's effect. Of the three we vastly preferred "Ah Q."

We were fascinated with the ballets because they helped us understand more about how China adapts alien art forms--in this case one from Russia. The first two pieces were merely derivative and forgettable. They could have been choreographed anywhere, in any not very excellent ballet company. "Ah Q" interested us because it combined elements of both cultures, while maintaining a Chinese emphasis on narrative plotting used to communicate the psychology of character through strict attention to action. A sophisticated Western audience might find the performance too old-fashioned and literal. But within the cultural context, and as an exploration of traditional narrative practice, we enjoyed it very much.

We still haven't seen anything in Shanghai as excellent as *The White Haired Girl*, which we saw on U.S. television years ago. It was good for precisely the reasons we like "The True Story of Ah Q." Mentioning our opinion to Lao Yang, our coordinator, involved us in a terrible faux pas. She winced, then said in her blunt, friendly way that we had better keep this opinion to ourselves. During the GPCR, Jiang Qing banned all but eight plays. Tickets kept being issued and cadres began forcing people to sit through performances over and over again. No one ever wants to hear the names of those operas mentioned again.

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The constant cross-pollination that has gone on historically between traditional opera and fiction showed up in the modern performance we just saw at the Shanghai Academy of Dramatic Arts. The graduating class gave a rendition of Ba Jin's novel *Family*. In its original novel-form the story became one of the best loved of the May Fourth period (1919-1930). This was the period which established the colloquial language novel. Ba Jin is still alive, in spite of what he suffered during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR). The performance intrigued us. Not only various plays, but a number of movies have been made from the original novel; so everyone we talked to was comparing the play to the movies. Literate people all know the plots and characters as well as they know the stories in a traditional novel like *Dream of the Red Chamber*, an earlier novel also about the decline of a great family. Don remembers very clearly reading the novel as a boy in Shanghai in the 1930s. The fatalism of the novel had been an unquestioned part of life in his social class then.

The story is set in the 1920s and criticizes the old Chinese family system. Subplots abound. The main line of the novel follows three brothers of one branch, much in the style of Turgenev. Actually *Family* is only one volume of a much longer story cycle. The adaptation we saw was not too successful, but we enjoyed it for other reasons. It intrigued us to hear the older, May Fourth language--Chinese with Westernized sentence structure--spoken on stage. In line with the language, the actors gave half operatic, half naturalistic performances. Main characters acted in heavily romantic, expressive modes and the minor roles as simple caricatures. But mostly we felt the vitality of the narrative, which still found viewers and readers fifty years and much controversy after being written.

Western style theatre entered China during the May Fourth period. And the only reason it survived the GPCR is that the film industry refused to let go of Western conventions like conversational spoken dialogue. But even now many people prefer local opera to formal, Western style proscenium-style theatre. Among the aficionados, Arthur Miller's well-publicized trip to the PRC after the GPCR, to promote literary and other cultural exchanges, boosted official support for Western theatre.

Several days ago we saw a performance of his *The Crucible*. We walked into a full house. No one seemed any more formally dressed than usual. We have trouble distinguishing people by the way they dress, but it seemed to us that there were working people in the audience, though our students told us tickets to this play were extremely hard to come by. The lights went out and the curtain rose on a well-designed Western-style stage setting. On walked a group of actors all very convincingly Caucasian with the help of putty noses and blond wigs. Certain Chinese cultural circles are convinced that Arthur Miller's anti-McCarthy era drama has significance in their own post-GPCR milieu. Maybe because the cast included some of the best Western style actors in the country, we saw what they meant. The production was heavily stylized. Actors delivered lines as though they had rehearsed them with a metronome. Once we got over this stagy delivery style peculiar to Chinese theatre we found ourselves carried away by the dramatic tension.

But the audience didn't seem to be reacting the way Western audiences do. People kept making comments about the acting, sometimes very loudly just like the Peking opera audience had several days ago. It reminded us of a Kabuki audience in Japan. There people talk, cheer, eat, walk around and generally view the "play" as a spectacle, ignoring the dramatic element which so thoroughly dominates all Western theatre--the illusion of the proscenium arch. This audience did not seem to want to mistake the events going on the stage with real events. Dramatic mimesis, or the theatrical effect which turns playacting into a shadowy reality by silencing the audience, had no place in the production. After the show the applause seemed lukewarm and we couldn't tell whether that too was convention or disappointment.

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We went to a movie, ZHONG SHEN (THE CHIME OF THE CLOCK), adapted from the award-winning short story of 1979 "Qiao changzhang-ren ji" ("The Story of Factory Manager Qiao's Assuming Responsibility"). The movie was about factory

management after the GPCR. The hero, a responsible through not flawless cadre, volunteers to try to reform a failing plant, and the plot follows his efforts to rationalize management and resolve worker dissatisfaction.

In one scene, factory people watch the opera *Qin Ziang Lian (The Fragrant Lotus)*, which tells how the righteous Judge Bao Gong resolves a particularly difficult case. Bao Gong is forced to arrest the son-in-law of the emperor. This man abandoned his first wife and tried to have her killed so he could marry the princess. The first wife appeals for justice. The emperor's mother and the new wife-princess warn the judge he had better not proceed. At that point, Bao Gong sings a famous aria in which he resolves to carry out his duty even if it costs him his office, and, possibly, his life. Somewhat later in the film, the hero repeats the aria to himself as he prepares to institute an unpopular yet necessary production reform in the factory.

We notice this re-legitimation of old culture everywhere. Students and friends love to point to the revival of popular Chinese arts, like opera and painting. Increasingly we realize the extent to which the resurgence has official sanction.

We thought the movie was pretty critical. But several people laughed at us when we told them we had enjoyed it. Things are much, much worse than that, they assured us.

Along with the resurgence of the old culture we've noticed a definite rise in the level of Han patriotism promoted through the media. This came up obviously in FENG-LIU QIAN-GU (RENOWN THROUGH THE AGES). We had a hard time understanding the film's dialogue because actors actually spoke in classical Chinese and poetry. Sometimes translations into colloquial language appeared at the bottom of the screen and we noticed most of the audience had to rely on the subtitles, too.

The plot concerned a famous patriot and his wife, both poets, who lived at the end of the Song dynasty. Dramatic action revolved around the old Chinese triangle--the mother blames the wife for the husband's patriotic activities. Even though they love each other passionately, the couple are also models of filial piety; they give in to the mother's demand that they divorce. Both remarry. They meet accidentally years later in the garden courtyard they once shared. The husband cannot suppress his feelings, and after writing a poem on the garden wall, he runs away. The former wife dies soon after. The movie version ended with her death. But historically the male poet finally left his parents and the second wife they had selected for him, to fight against the invading northern barbarians. The film was an interesting use of history. Actually, aristocratic Chinese of the period overwhelmingly ignored the barbarian threat. They huddled in their elegant southern capital until the invading Mongols simply ran right over them.

We disliked the film, particularly the character of the hero. The revival of filial virtue and family obedience made us extremely uncomfortable, as did the sacrifice of marital happiness to parents' needs. Over the years we have seen many films from the PRC and always preferred the modem heroes whose loyalty lies with their work unit. In spite of our reservations about the regressive social theme, we noticed that everyone else liked the patriotic parts immensely.

Photography is the rage now. Everybody tries to rent or borrow a camera at least

once, in order to photograph family and relatives. But we've also met a growing number of young men all trying to parlay their skill into a serious hobby, so they can show their work in the competitive photo contests. We saw one such contest in Suzhou last weekend; another is going on here at the campus right now. Prizewinning photographs fall into two general categories, either insistently perspectival shots of natural scenery, or simple translations of conventional Chinese landscape painting into a photographic medium. Some high-speed action shots of dances and athletes show up in second or third place. But the only thing we never find are candid snapshots. Without exception Chinese viewers expect photos to be posed, formal and public. The emphasis on photo-landscape parallels 19th-century Western photographic history to some degree, which also began by imitating painting conventions. As the camera pushes its intrusive way into popular perception, current photographic styles will inevitably change. In the meantime, photographers continue taking formal landscapes that look like painting and people "sit" for posed portraits.

In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag said the photographic image breaks reality into pieces. The Chinese are still resisting that pressure. They try to put as much of themselves into a photo as possible, and they don't like tourists to snap up little pieces of the whole. We always ask politely for permission to photograph. Sometimes we get it, but more often people politely turn us down. One time in Suzhou we spotted some peasant women in colorful headkerchieves at the entrance of a garden. We asked for permission, but the women didn't understand standard Chinese. A man appeared. "Why do you want to photograph them?" he asked. "Because they are beautiful," we replied. "They are not beautiful," he said unbelievingly. "They are just peasants." You have in that remark the usual urban-rural opposition, but also cross-cultural perceptions of beauty, and what ought to be photographed.

How a people communicates meaning differs culturally. In China, the written graph has always dominated and controlled meaning, how people understand, think and communicate. Modernity has introduced the image. Right now, the image is a simple affair, a photograph which merely captures the likeness of family and scenic nature. But in the form of the advertising image, invested with all sorts of modem power, it can overthrow older perceptual categories. Since the end of the GPCR, more advanced, potentially dynamic, advertising has proliferated. How this new form of communication will affect the older, ideographic culture is a fascinating problem to watch.

Instead of the rigid, severe political billboards of ten years ago, a pretty young woman's face surrounded by a few butterflies and bees endorses soap, face-cream or toothpaste. A progressive couple holding a beautiful child proclaim the virtues of the new family planning policy. These advertising images merely reinforce the verbal message. We see them as straightforward and naive. But people have already started complaining about their overtly seductive messages. Chinese ads haven't yet started juxtaposing or contrasting one image with another, because audiences here do not expect the mixed, loaded interplay of meaning Western consumer societies invest in commodity advertising. You do not find things like the famous Levy's ryebread ad which justaposed a picture of bread with the image of an Indian chief, suggesting all Americans should eat "Jewish" rye. There aren't any ads where a sign and a different image are linked to form a third meaning. Since

Chinese consumers have as yet only been exposed to one-level advertising, where image is properly contexted by the sign, those who read Western magazines find themselves extremely vulnerable to the flashy, sophisticated, semi-surrealist ads.

Chinese brand names have developed without pressure from the west. In the United States, corporate names sometimes attach to particular commodities, Ike "Coke" or "Frigidaire." We also have animal brands which enhance the image of a commodity. A man who drives a Mustang or a Cougar gets the sexual power of the giant cat or wild horse, along with the car. In China, animal brands are common, but they don't seem to enhance the intrinsic quality of the product. Most Shanghainese prefer Flying Pigeon bicycles over other available brands such as Flying Deer, Sea Lion and Phoenix. Phoenix has been the symbol of fortune for millenia, so it shows up on many other commodities, like cigarettes. We use a Flying Fish typewriter, but there are also Flying Fish handkerchieves. Since people love butterflies, they can buy Butterfly cosmetics, and Butterfly sewing machines. Traditionally Chinese have conferred special meaning to everything double, so we find Double Butterfly jackets, Double Horse textiles, and Twin Cat blankets. Panda wine and Panda condensed milk seem to borrow product recognition from the characteristic Chinese animal. White evidently enhances a brand, so there is a White Cat washing detergent, White Rabbit cream candies, and Big White Rabbit powdered milk. We've also come across Gold Cock biscuits, Seagull shampoo, Peacock socks, Bee and Honey soap, and Lion toothpaste. Our particular favorite would never sell in the U.S.: White Elephant flashlights.

There are several ways to explain China's heavy reliance on animal brand names. Since the state rather than corporations control commodity circulation, one wouldn't expect heavy reliance on sex to sell products. But Chinese thinking has always drawn correspondences between animals and human activities. In *tai-ji quan* (Chinese shadow boxing) you part the wild horse's mane, stoop so the white crane can spread its wings, grasp the tail of the bird, and so on. Brand names fall back on a cultural reservoir of these images, drawn from folklore, language association and poetry. The important difference, so far as we can tell, is that these images do not attempt directly to enhance the value of a commodity or to sexualize it. You don't drink Big White Rabbit milk in order to look like one or to breed like one.

Contemporary Chinese filmic image also comes framed inside the older, more familiar, fictional narrative. Films have big plots gradually unfolding, with definitive, moral messages. The audience transfers its novel-reading habits to the screen, and expects a film to be like a novel, the more subplots the better. Coming from the U.S., we know the filmic image's potential to break older, narrative frameworks. But so far, Chinese films don't have the sheer visual impact Hollywood delivers. Someone we know attended a special screening of Francis Coppola's APOCALYPSE NOW at the Shanghai Movie Studio and was absolutely horrified by the visual intensity of the film. Generally, Chinese filmgoers expect the plot to unfold in one, forward-going direction. They find excessive use of flashbacks upsetting. We are accustomed to Hollywood films and tend to find Chinese movies too slow and not visually stimulating enough, precisely because they still subordinate the essential property of film, the image, to the older literary conventions of novel and story. Chinese film reduces cinematographic dynamics to literary narrative.

Television is the most popular luxury in China today. Since Chinese TV production remains fairly limited and studios do not shoot enough footage to fill two nightly channels, plus weekend daytime TV, it uses a lot of foreign footages dubbed in Chinese. The evening program begins at 7 with domestic news; a person sits in front of a map of the PRC and reads the news out aloud. This is followed by fifteen minutes of international news, using footages supplied by the information offices of Western governments and Western TV stations. At 7:30 you often get Western documentaries. One night we saw a German film about horse breeding. This is followed by the Chinese equivalent of Western soap opera, maybe the story of an ideal courtship between a factory worker and a PLA officer. Another night we saw an excellent Peking opera based on an episode from *Journey to the West*, a traditional epic about the adventures of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to India.

Recently a channel has been running a very popular Japanese samurai film and a Hong Kong gung-fu serial. Both shows are a lot more violent than Chinese fares, and some Shanghai parents have started worrying about the effect on their kids. But obviously Chinese television has not taken over and dominated channels of communication as has happened in the U.S. Nor do advertisements play a central role. U.S. TV's most effective programming is the expensive commercial with its speedy, surrealist montage. Chinese commercials, sedate and straightforward, have a long way to go, before they shape popular imagination the way Western ads do.

So far, communication of photo, advertising, filmic and television images has not overturned the tradition of the narrativity of the ideograph. In America, publicity image sustained by corporate capitalism has all but taken over the definition of reality. Chinese still prefer the formal portrait to the photo snapshot, the unilevel reinforcement of advertising sign by image, the straightforward re-broadcasting of other media on the TV screen. We suspect Chinese image communication will never match America's powerful, multi-perspectival media, partly because the ideograph, a combination of picture and sign, has more capacity to resist photo image than the abstract alphabet, and partly because narrative is fundamental to the PRC as a means of communicating political ideology.

Monday evening, we went to a modern dance-drama called *Feng-ming Qi-shan (The Phoenix Returns to Mount Qi)*, based on a legend about the fall of the Shang and the rise of the Zhou dynasty in ancient China. The performance combined many styles, including Western ballet, modern dance, and a little traditional folk dance. As usual, dances used representational pantomime to act out the heavily plotted narrative. We didn't enjoy it at first, but after a while the narrative pulled us in and we ended up enjoying several of the routines. The rest of the audience sat in enraptured trance, thoroughly enjoying this innovative theatre, forbidden just a few years ago. Except Lao Gu, the college driver, a lanky, slow-moving balding man with a sweet, shy smile and a heavy Shanghai accent, who is a Chinese opera buff. He listens to the radio broadcasts in the car and sings along with the arias. Lao Gu kept reading the program notes, trying to follow this plot. Then he discovered a program ad taken out by the Shanghai People's Television Factory.

"What is this page of advertising doing in the theatre program?" he grumbled to us. For him, realities are consistent and self-contained. No connection yet exists between television and dance-drama, or the dance troupe and the Shanghai People's Television Factory.

NOTES

1. THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL was based on the classic revolutionary play written in Yenan during WWII, which became one of the few "model" operas to be performed in various media (including ballet) during the GPCR. It recounts the tale of a peasant woman driven to live in the mountains like an animal; her suffering concretized by her prematurely white hair. Eventually, the Red Army arrives to turn the tables on the wicked landlords who drove her to this fate.

2. PLA = People's Liberation Army.

The last word
Disharmonic convergence

by the editors

In Reagan's second term several conservative intellectuals published articles, books, and speeches calling for a return to "cultural literacy," or college basics, meaning re-establishing the traditional 20th century humanities curriculum. According to conservatives, the Great Western Tradition had been displaced by new multicultural and interdisciplinary programs such as Afro-American studies, Chicano studies, women's studies, popular culture and film studies. Ignoring the fact that typically such programs are under-funded and understaffed, and in many cases built through overtime and dedication, the critics did notice something true.

The basis for much film and other media arts studies in the US appeared with the significant shift in academic enrollments in the 1970s that decreased traditional humanities and arts areas, especially English and foreign languages, and swelled majors in other areas, such as communications, poli-sci, and business. The long reign of language, literature, and history as the prestige curriculum in academe came to an end in the late Sixties less because of the criticism and antics of the New Left and counterculture, and more because the service sector economy found other majors well suited to the imperatives of a declining imperial, postindustrial economy. As the older U.S. pattern of low cost, subsidized, higher education changed into today's personal debt-financed one for most students (U.S. college grads' average debt on graduation is $24,000), they looked for courses that would give them a job rather than an appreciation of the patriarchial caucasian past. By voting with their enrollment cards, they undercut the need for language, literature, and history classes.

The end of print culture dominance seems like the end of civilization itself to conservative ideologues such as Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and William Bennett, who can't seem to understand that because in a period of industrial decline, the US remains successful at exporting entertainment and images, it makes sense that those areas of the university which train students in the culture and consciousness industry will benefit at the expense of those areas linked to mechanical technologies. Nor do conservatives want to face the flip side of Reagan era. The Great Communicator created the ideological space that made their conservative claims plausible and respectable, but he also brought forth the consummate corporate man of the 80s: Ollie North scamming Iranian arms deals,

raising money for the contras with his slide show, and shredding and lying in order to protect a Movie Star President.

Another conservative charge, that the now-tenured academic left ruthlessly dominates the universities and colleges, proves to be equally dubious on inspection, but recognizes a new development. Following the McCarthy era's silencing of dissent, there has been a broadening and expansion of radical discourse in higher education and in the broader intellectual world. At times this stems largely from students and activist teachers insisting on the relevance of new concerns in the classroom. At other times disciplinary boundaries change or crack as new people and different views emerge. The introduction of media, along with issues of gender, race, class, and multicultural analysis into the curriculum redefines the terrain of intellectual radicalism as the introduction of new content opens the way for new forms of political analysis and discussion.

Film culture in the Fifties and Sixties began outside the university curriculum and often served as a cultural opposition to the dominant values of Cold War America. For many intellectuals in the post WW2 era, European art cinema and a struggling independent film movement encompassing experimental and documentary modes provided a look at cultures and ideas organized differently than official America. It was a field which included the dense international film culture of New York city, and a significant section of its intellectuals, as well as people sustaining a film society or small art theatre in a midwest college town. Film provided a glimpse of other peoples, other possibilities, other emotions, other lifestyles than those sanctioned by the official U.S. blandness.

Media culture today is vastly larger. The industrially organized consciousness and consumption culture of the U.S. has its own caste of media producers and manipulators. For a specific part of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, media is or is closely related to their employment: in film, TV, video, advertising, public relations, performance, etc. For an overlapping group, cinema/ video is a significant leisure/ entertainment/ cultural pursuit. These are people who attend festivals, art house screenings, film clubs, retrospectives, sponsored screenings for fundraising or educational purposes, etc. They like to also read about what is going on in newspapers, magazines, and books. If they're 20 or 30 something, they probably took several film courses in college. They pay attention to TV movie reviewers. Though more verbal and print oriented, they follow a similar pattern to more working class people who like to rent lots of movies to see at home on their VCR and who find out what's new and good from word of mouth, Entertainment Tonight and cable tv's current entertainment channels.

In such circumstances, the nature of film culture changes, expands, and blends into other areas of cultural concern. And the full-fledged emergence of film and tv studies in the universities is part of that. The existence of professors calls forth conference papers, articles, reviews, and books. The existence of graduate and undergraduate students calls forth consumers for academic production. But something bigger than that is happening throughout the English speaking academic world right now. There is a huge expansion of work in the general area of cultural studies, and expansion which itself breaks down disciplinary boundaries between high and low culture, performing and fine arts, between critical and historical methodologies, between aesthetic and sociological analysis.

The result is a disharmonic convergence of people from very different academic disciplines, methodologies, suppositions, and experiences. To some extent media studies have always drawn investigators from other areas, but what we see now is a quantitative change which is producing a qualitative shift. The political significance of this is that there is a widespread ferment in the area of radical cultural criticism and the creation of a field which includes the stiffly academic and the informally journalistic, the delicate import and the hardy native, the theoretical and the experiential.

Today the U.S. left has consistently intelligent and interesting cultural reportage and criticism in its two major weekly newspapers, *In These Times* and *The Guardian*. Other major forums for new cultural analysis such as the *Village Voice* frequently publish progressive writers. Other signs of a resurgent cultural critique include new culturally oriented left publications such as *Borderlines, Cineaction*, and *Fuse* from Canada, new journals which stress the social nature of mass culture phenomena such as *New Formations* (UK), *Cultural Studies* (Australia) and *Cultural Critique* (US). At the same time, some long standing publications have survived to the present and still contribute to innovative analysis such as *Screen* (UK), *New German Critique*, and *Camera Obscura*, while others have revived their relevance such as *October* with its recent AIDS and cultural activism issue. Monthlies such as *Afterimage* and *The Independent* have grown to be central souces for news and discussion of the independent media scene. University presses publish major anthologies such as Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Illinois) and Don Lazare's *American Media and Mass Culture* (California).

Conservatives have a right to be worried about the expansion of radical intellectual thought in the area of culture and communications. It's clear that the momentum of new and interesting cultural analysis falls on the left side. Conservatives, wandering in their Gutenberg wilderness, haven't seen the superhighway of mass culture much less the bike path of critical cultural studies. Thus for the near future, at least, the continued expansion of mass culture analysis seems to fuel an alternative to George Bush's view of "a kinder and gentler America." There is a generation of professors now in the universities who are perhaps more liberal than radical, but who, in any case, see that the terms for understanding contemporary consciousness in an age of digital reproductive technologies are terms essentially set up by a range of radical thinkers and the plurality of political movements they come out of. The triumph of the Right in the U.S., England, Canada and elsewhere in the 80s has been partly due to an immense power and some talent at manipulating the media environment. Its sore point in the 1990s may well be a generation of students facing diminished expectations and a lower standard of living than their parents being taught communications, not the classics, by leftists and liberals, feminists and internationalists, gays, lesbians, and other-gendered persons, Blacks and Latinos, and all the rest of the "cultural literacy" nightmare The possibilities are interesting, to say the least.